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THE NUMBER ON MY FOREHEAD

A Survivor's Story

By Isak Arbus

Unpublished Work

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*Isak Arbus*

PII Redacted



## Foreword

Why yet another Holocaust survivor's story? One answer is that each survivor's story is different, often unique. Even those individuals who spent some time in the same camp, had to face different dangers, encounter different persecutors, and, in most cases, were liberated under different circumstances.

My story includes an additional detail: as a Polish soldier of the 1939 campaign, I was captured by the enemy and taken to POW camps in Germany, where I had to face the conquerors on their home grounds.

On my return to Warsaw in the spring of 1940, I witnessed the medieval ghetto being revived by the occupant, and the upheaval this created in the life of our people.

Finally, as a medical assistant in a number of Nazi camps, including one place, near the end of the war, where, because there was no prisoner-physician available, I was forced to shoulder the awesome responsibility of a "Lagerarzt" (Camp doctor), I saw and experienced the extremes of the human condition.

Nearly a half a century elapsed since that dark period, but my memory refuses to go blank. I tell my story as unvarnished and accurate as is humanly possible. I am motivated in this endeavor by a strong belief that these experiences deserve a permanent record, to be added to the efforts of other survivors, so that the true events of the Shoah, told by us, could serve as an antidote against the poisonous lies and distortion, even denials, emanating from unfriendly sources.

New York, 1993



A Premature Death Notice    A Grateful Dedication

In the early summer of 1940, shortly after my return from a German POW camp, a message was delivered to our home by Polish Red Cross worker. The message was, apparently, in response to my parents' inquiry as to my whereabouts, shortly after I was captured in the 1939 campaign and taken to Germany. I was alone in the apartment so I was the first one to read the startling document. The middle aged, kindly faced Gentile woman was astonished to see me smile, after I finished reading the terse message. When I told her who I was, her confusion gave way to a broad smile. She apologized for the error, wished me well, and departed, leaving the curious document behind as a souvenir for me.

Regretably, in one of the camps I was forced to destroy the precious document, but I remember the document rather well. This is the reconstructed by me text:

Polish Red Cross  
Warsaw, June 1940

Dear Mrs. Arbuz:

In answer to your inquiries, the Polish Red Cross regrets to inform you that your son, Izaak Arbuz, rifleman of the second battalion of the 32nd infantry regiment, eighth division of the Polish Armed Forces, stationed at Modlin, fell in battle at Kutno, on the 12th of September 1939.

When my relatives and friends heard of the erroneous message, their reaction was almost uniform: "Izaak," they said, "you will survive this war!" I did. But almost all of my well wishers, who so generously predicted my survival, did not themselves survive. I dedicate my story to their memory.

Isak Arbus

Spring 1994



## Finally Free

On the morning of April 29, 1945, they finally came. Our liberators, a platoon of unshaven, dust covered men in unfamiliar uniforms, marched through the Bavarian village of Ponthartsberg, while we waved. Standing there, in our ridiculous, striped, pajama-like outfits, my two companions and I tried to communicate with these friendly strangers by means of German, Polish and Yiddish. A few responded, directing at us, in a hodge-podge of languages, words of encouragement and greetings.

But there was no much cheering. If the Americans were, perhaps, too tired to cheer, we had more profound reasons. After nearly six years of almost unrelieved tension and constant worry, this was an anticlimactic moment. We were simply drained of feeling. And, finally free, we were hit by the enormity of our losses. Are we, perhaps, the only European Jews left alive? In our desperate isolation we could imagine the worst.

## Fortress Modlin

It was a long, strange and tortuous road that brought me here, to this obscure village in Lower Bavaria. It all began six years earlier in an old-fashioned Polish fortress, about twenty miles northwest of my hometown, Warsaw.

Modlin, an old tsarist stronghold, built in the days when Russia ruled that part of Poland, was the homebase of the 32nd infantry regiment of the eighth division of the Polish army. In the spring of that fateful year of 1939, at the age of 21, I was drafted into the army, and sent to the fortress to serve.



The usual hardships and tensions of a recruit, aggravated by the ingrained anti-Semitism of many of my colleagues and superiors, passed somehow, and I was beginning to feel a little more relaxed.

In early August, around my 22nd birthday (I was born on August 9, 1917), I was given my first furlough, a twenty-four hour break to visit my family. As there were no printed passes available in our backward army, the commanding officer simply wrote out on a piece of paper the permission for me and ~~to~~ to save on paperwork, no doubt) for another Varsovian, to take leave together.

On our arrival at the Warsaw railroad station, we realized that we had only one document for the two of us. My companion, an intelligent, decent fellow, agreed to let me have the scrap of paper. I, as a Jew, was more vulnerable, and he thought that he could get away without the permit.

I had an happy reunion with my family. In addition to my parents, I saw my brothers David and Joseph. I also managed to visit my two married sisters, Sara and Golda, and their children. My oldest brother, Julian, was married to a woman from Suwalki, a town in the northeastern part of the country, and moved there after the wedding, shortly before I was drafted. Naturally, I was not able to see him.

In the evening I met my favorite girl, Bronka. She had dark hair, black eyes, a fine complexion, and a sensitive, Semitic nose. More importantly, she was bright and intelligent. We embraced and walked over to a park overlooking the Vistula river. The park, some distance away from our neighborhood, and situated in the older part of the city, had ancient trees, comfortable benches, and an air of tranquility. The quiet flow of the water in the river helped to soothe the pain of such a brief visit.



We sat on a bench, talking, making plans for the future, and munching on chocolate bars and peanuts. As a civilian I would have never dreamt of going to that place in the evening; it was simply not our turf. With my new status as a Polish soldier, a bayonet at my side, I took a chance.

We stayed there until around midnight. I escorted Bronka to her place, hastily said good bye-it was easier that way-and returned home. Home was a crowded, two room cold water flat, on a street called Nalewki. Next morning I took leave of my family, met my companion, and together boarded the train back to Modlin.

Sitting with my companion in our train compartment, I was mulling over the disquieting news heard in Warsaw. In the army, without access to the media, we were in effect isolated from the world at large. In my civilian life I used to peruse daily several papers, and considered myself rather well informed. But several month of army life left a void in my political awareness. What I heard on my brief visit revived my apprehension of the rapidly deteriorating Polish-German, as well as Polish Jewish relations.

The Polish government in 1939 was in the hands of a military junta, the so called colonels, who took over after the death of marshall Pilsudski, the leader of Poland since its independence. Colonel Josef Beck, the foreign minister, had strong pro-German sympathies, and at one time hosted an infamous hunt party in the Polish woods, for marshall Goering. The prime minister, general Slawoj-Skladkowski, in a well known interview, granted to a national daily, when asked by a reporter if he supported an economic boycott of Jewish businesses, exclaimed: "Boycott? Certainly!" In the context of the internal politics of the time, his answer, although shocking to the Jewish population, was not unexpected. His party, the so called "OZON", (Camp of National Unity), tried despe-



rately to compete with the National Democrats, popularly known as Endeks, an old, well established opposition party, highly nationalistic, and with a strong antisemitic platform. The Endeks at that time conducted a vicious campaign against Jewish businesses, and Jewish students at universities across Poland.

While the attention of the Polish public was thus preoccupied by the diversionary "Jewish Question", the Germans were quietly preparing for an attack against Poland. The official bone of contention was the Polish Corridor, which separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. This "corridor", a strip of land connecting Poland to the Baltic, was granted to Poland at the end of World War 1, to provide access to the sea. Hitler skillfully exploited this and other provisions of the Versailles Treaty, to whip up German resentment against the Poles. There was plenty to worry about.

Ironically, a few days after my return to the Modlin fortress, while I was on sentry duty, guarding a newly erected bunker, I had the dubious pleasure of having to stand at attention, while the prime minister Slawoj-Skladkowski, the one of the "Bojkot owszem!" (Boycott? Certainly!) fame, made a surprise inspection tour of the Modlin area.

Meanwhile, I settled back to the routine of army life. Shooting practice on the range, (where I discovered that I am quite a good marksman,) beastly bayonet charges against dummies, performed with the obligatory, blood curdling war yells, marches, sometimes with our gas masks on, making breathing extremely difficult, filled our days.

The theft of my bayonet suddenly interrupted my relative peace of mind. The stealing of equipment and other items was a chronic problem at the fortress. The need to supplement the inadequate food ration, and the craving for vodka, drove many of my fellow recruits to



stealing from their colleagues. Lockers were unknown in the nineteenth century barracks. All the private possessions were kept in our private foot lockers under the beds, while official issue towels and such military equipment as helmets and bayonets, had to be posted in a prescribed manner, on top of the beds.

The usual remedy for such losses was to snatch a belt, a towel, or a helmet, from another bed, when nobody was looking. However, a bayonet was another matter; it had a serial number. To pay for replacement, as army regulations stipulated, was beyond my means.

I was rescued from this minor dilemma by a major and disturbing change in our routine: we were suddenly mobilized.

#### At War

On the night of August 26, 1939, we were ordered to turn in our old equipment and uniforms, including even our underwear and shoes. In the ensuing chaos my lost bayonet became a nonissue. All of us received brand new uniforms and equipment, as well as a half a dozen hand grenades, and 120 rifle bullets. Ironically, everything was new and shiny, except the most important item, our rifles. The antiquated, rusty weapons we received were of the W.W.I vintage, older even than the weapons we just turned in. It struck me as incongruously funny that the ancient rifle I was now inspecting, was of German manufacture.

As a consolation and with a big air of secrecy, several new mystery weapons, wrapped crudely in blankets, were assigned to our battalion. Rumors had it that these were new, British made anti-tank guns.

It was clear that Poland was not prepared for serious warfare. Nobody could believe that these obsolete rifles could win a modern war against a determined enemy.



That night few of us could sleep. Tension was understandably high. Rumors, fed by an absence of reliable information, mushroomed: Hitler invaded Poland; the Western Allies were mobilizing; our troops are marching on Berlin.

With all that excitement I fell asleep very late. All of a sudden, the alarm trumpet sounded; all up! We dressed quickly. With the crack of dawn our regiment was put on a march in a northerly direction, apparently toward the Prussian border.

It is difficult to believe, in view of the threat that hung over Poland at that time, and in light of subsequent events, that the Polish Armed Forces in 1939 were so primitive, and that hardly any attempt was made by the Polish leadership to modernize them.

There were no trucks or other types of transportation available to us. We had to march on foot, true to our designation as infantry... We were loaded down with heavy knapsacks, rolled blankets, weapons, ammunition, gas masks, small field shovels, shoulder bags. We were additionally hampered by the discomfort of our blistered feet. Socks were an unknown commodity in the army. Instead, we had to wrap our feet with squares of rough linen, known in Polish as "onuce." These wraps had the unpleasant way of shifting in the heavy boots, inevitably causing painful blisters during extensive marches.

Consequently, our progress was slow. Before we were able to reach the East-Prussian border, the Germans crossed it on <sup>Friday,</sup> September 1, and, being highly mobile, they were soon everywhere. After a brief skirmish, we managed to take one prisoner, and were ordered, inexplicably, back to Modlin, our home base.

Some soldiers, seething with rage at the unprovoked attack by the Germans, thought of taking revenge on the tall, blond, scared prisoner. They filled his knapsack with heavy stones, and forced



him to carry the load. Lucky for the German, an army officer appeared on the scene, and, cursing, ordered them to cease the harassment forthwith. He declared that we are all bound by the rules of the Geneva Convention, which forbids mistreatment of POW's. Recalling later that episode, I often wished that the Germans had as much respect for the Geneva Convention as that anonymous Polish officer.

Now we trudged along, trying to avoid the enemy troops, often taking shortcuts through country lanes, sometimes even crossing muddy fields, to hasten our return.

One time we passed an abandoned house, very substantial and well kept. Some of us entered the mansion, in search of food. The place had all the markings of an hastily abandoned residence of well to do owners. Unfortunately there was no food anywhere to be found. I noticed that some soldiers helped themselves to silver and other valuables, which I found, in my innocence, very strange since this was not enemy territory... From time immemorial looting of <sup>n</sup>co~~y~~quered lands ~~was~~ acceptable by the mores of society, but here was a place that belonged to Poles. I was disturbed but kept my mouth shut. Besides, I had other things to worry about.

We continued on our trek, hungry and deperate. In fairness I must say that our officers suffered the same hardships, but at least they were not burdened by heavy loads, as we, the ordinary soldiers, were. A few of them rode on horses.

I vividly remember one particular officer, a veteran of W.W. 1. This major, a strict disciplinarian, had the right side of his face scarred and grotesquely flattened. It was rumored that a



rebellious soldier, way back during the first World War, hit him in the face with such force that he nearly killed him.

This stern major<sup>1</sup> was now trying to find some food for the soldiers. He soon spotted a field full of ripe tomatoes. He repeatedly filled his helmet with the red fruit and went around offering each of us a large, juicy tomato. No tomato before or after that time tasted as delicious... But it was only a teaser; what we needed urgently was a more substantial meal.

Our legs felt leaden, as we finally made it back to the fortress. Exhausted but cheered by the prospects of some normality, I laid down to sleep on my bunk. But I was overly optimistic in my assumption. Late at night an alarm tore me from my heavy sleep. Still groggy from lack of rest, I, along with my companions, was ordered to dress on the run, and led on another march. Fortunately, we did not have to go far; our destination this time were trenches built on the perimeter of Modlin.

The Germans apparently reached the area, because in the following several days we spent in the trenches, a constant barrage of artillery fire was our unwelcome companion. While the enemy kept up the shelling, we remained passive. Probably our side had no appropriate means to respond with.

What was worse, at least for our personal wellbeing, was a complete lack of food.. It was obvious that ~~our~~ support system ceased to function altogether. To my chagrin, a ration of cigarettes was distributed once, which, as a non-smoker, I saw as a cruel joke.

I remember digging up some potatoes, since our trenches were positioned in a potato field. I attempted to roast them, but I had neither the fuel, nor the skill, necessary to bring that



about. I was cold, hungry, and miserable.

The German invasion was in its third week, when our regiment was suddenly withdrawn from the trenches and ordered to march toward Warsaw. Although we were kept in ignorance of our destination, some of us believed that to be the case. The day was Sunday, September 17.

At first we marched in orderly ranks, led by our officers. Soon however we noticed that some of our officers are no more with us. Worn out and hungry, many of our companions began to fall behind. We pressed on, nevertheless. Nobody knew anymore what was going on, one could only guess that the Germans are conquering the country. For the moment I had few thoughts about the future. Physical exhaustion and fear of being hit by the German artillery, which kept following us incessantly, was foremost on our mind. A highly disciplined group only a few days ago, we were now a bunch of desperate <sup>men</sup>, pressing on, to an unknown destiny.

Artillery shells were coming all around us, most exploding harmlessly on the ground, but some did hit one or two thatched roof cottages, which we were passing. They burst into flames which nobody even tried to put out. One soldier, who apparently still retained a sense of humor, remarked, as we were passing a small crater, caused by a shell, that the crater would be the safest place to stay in, as it was highly unlikely for another shell to hit the same spot...

Meanwhile, my legs were almost ready to collapse. I knew that I would not be able to march much longer. I spoke to two of my nearest companions, one of them also Jewish, about the possibility of finding some food. ~~They~~ agreed to join me. We entered one of the cottages and told the peasant woman, hovering in fear



in fear inside, that we must have something to eat. "There is nothing left," she replied hesitantly. But seeing our desperate determination, she mumbled something about getting hold of a chicken in the backyard.

She left through a rear door, and the three of us, in expectation of a decent meal, deposited our rifles near the door, posted the steel helmets on the rifles, and sat down on a bench. For some reason, the German artillery fire receded somewhat.

#### Captured by the Waffen SS

Our brief tranquility was shattered by a sudden, unfamiliar roar outside. Before we had a chance to investigate, the door was violently kicked open, and there, framed by the light of that particular day, stood an apparition, a black uniformed soldier, with a submachine gun at the ready. "Haende hoch, raus, schnell!" (Hands up, out, quick!), he barked in German. The three of us, completely stunned, stumbled out of the hut. Another German picked up our weapons, and contemptuously tossed them outside. These antique pieces apparently amused him, because I thought that I saw a grin on his face. But now things were happening fast; there was no time for reflection. The roar we just heard came from a big tank, idling outside. Another tank was just approaching. It was clear that, unknown to us, the Germans saw us enter the peasant's hut. Two Germans took away our ammunition and the hand grenades and ordered us to climb on the tanks.

Two of us found ourselves sitting on each side of the turret, from which a heavy cannon was protruding. Our third companion, the gentile, was clinging to the top of the second tank, which stopped



just ahead of us. We were in German hands.

Still stunned, i held on to the unfamiliar, threatening monstrosity, afraid that I might slide off into the maws of the caterpillar tracks, as the two tanks began to move. In the opening just below me, I could see a young officer, with his face flushed and sweaty, perhaps the tank commander, busy with his two way radio. I calmed down a bit and took notice of the runic SS symbols and ~~SS~~ the skulls and crossbones on the enemy's uniforms. It was quite a scary sight.

Suddenly, more trouble. A large, disorganized group of Polish soldiers appeared on the road and began to shoot up the tanks with their obsolete rifles. Bullets were flying all around us. While the Germans were well protected behind the heavy steel, the three of us were in great danger of being hit by our own troops. It flashed momentarily through my mind that perhaps I should take advantage of the diversion created by the Polish soldiers, and jump off the tank. I knew that my chances of escaping unscathed were very slim. The wide, formidable caterpillar tracks, over which I would have to jump, while they were in motion, forced me to abandon the idea.

The young officer inside the tank, meanwhile, recovered from the initial confusion caused by the unexpected appearance of the Poles and ordered us two to yell in Polish to stop the shooting. We yelled: "Nie strzelać! Nie strzelać!" (Don't shoot! Don't shoot!) The Germans were apparently too close to the Poles, to be able to use their weapons effectively. The two tanks accelerated their speed and soon were out of the range of the Polish soldiers' ineffective fire.

For a while I lost sight of the other tank, which was proceeding ahead of us. But soon both tanks met again and we noticed



that our comrade on the second tank was gone. Was he hit and fell off the tank, or did he manage to escape? We never found out.

The tank crews, having apparently reported the incident to their headquarters, received new orders. They suddenly turned around and returned at full speed to the village we just left in such haste.

The peasants, who were invisible before, were now gathered in front of their homes, as if forewarned by somebody of the coming tragedy. Some were genuflecting, others were on their knees, exclaiming; 'Jesus, Maria!' Most of the women and children must have been hiding indoors, because few of them were visible.

The Germans, unmoved, now unleashed a barrage of flaming red, incendiary bullets. The terrible sight of these bullets igniting the thatched roofs, quickly turning the whole village into a burning mass, made me shiver, despite the heat coming from the burning homes. It gave a good foretaste of the horrors yet to come.

A short time later, out of the burning village again, our tank stopped next to an open field, and my companion was ordered to climb down from his perilous perch. He was taken, under guard, to a house visible in the distance, probably for interrogation. I assumed that he was chosen, because, of the two of us, he appeared older. In any case, we became separated and I never saw the fellow again.

The two tanks now moved fast, and after about a quarter of an hour later we arrived in a town, which I later identified as Babice. There, still on top of the tank, I could see a great concentration of German tanks and artillery. A battery of large cannons was firing continuously, no doubt, in direction of Warsaw. I was too confused with the rush of events to realize then that they were hitting hard



the place where all the people, dearest to me, lived.

But, in spite of all odds, I was still alive. I was finally ordered to climb off the tank and taken by one of the SSmen to the local fire station garage, where I was locked up for the night. Inside, I found another prisoner, a Polish army sergeant. He claimed, as I soon discovered, to be a "Volksdeutsche"<sup>1</sup>, no doubt to endear himself to his captors.

A young soldier, this time of the regular army (Wehrmacht) guarded our makeshift jail. He came in to converse with us. The highlight of that conversation was his assurance that the war was not really our fault. "Die Juden und die Engländer sind schuldig" he declared. (The Jews and the English are to blame). Thus "consoled", I stretched out on the floor, covered with some straw, and fell asleep.

The next morning, I was awakened by the guard. I was aching all over from sleeping on the hard, concrete floor, also hungry and dead-tired. Food, foremost on my mind, was not offered. Instead, I was marched off to a road, where I was ordered to join a large column of Polish prisoners. Perhaps two thousand men were guarded by a handful of German soldiers. (In the next five years I was to see this scene repeated many times: a handful of armed men dominating thousands of people, many able bodied. Apparently, given the right conditions, people will behave like sheep, thus hoping to avoid greater harm.)

We started to march, more less in ranks, in a Westerly di-

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<sup>1</sup>A "Volksdeutsche" was a designation given to people of German ancestry, living outside Germany.



rection. On the road there was a sudden order to stop: "Halt!" A German feldfebel barked: "Alle Juden heraustreten!" (All Jews step out). I thought to myself; so this is the beginning of trouble. I stepped out. One other soldier obeyed the order. It occurred to me that there must be more Jews in the column, but they must have decided to ignore the order. The noncom looked at us for a brief moment. I felt greatly relieved when he ordered us back into the ranks. My first encounter with Nazi anti-Semitism was over, without consequences. For the moment, at least.

I mused about my unthinking act of stepping out and decided that two factors were at work here: I never hid the fact of my Jewishness, and, as a soldier I was conditioned to obey orders mechanically. Besides, Jews were not yet aware of the Nazi designs for them.

After several hours of marching, the Germans herded us into a large local church. The edifice soon became jam-packed with prisoners. After a while local civilians brought in some bread and a pail of lard. Each of us got a small chunk of bread and a spoonful of lard; not enough bread and too much lard for the bread we got. A peasant woman brought in a pail of soup, which she carried to the altar. The good woman announced that since she did not have enough soup for everybody, she would like to give the soup to the captive officers. There was a commotion; people started to push, and, needless to say, most of the precious soup was spilled right there at the altar.

The church became very crowded and stuffy. People mingled about, mostly engaged in noisy discussion about the events of the day. As night approached, I secured a place under a pew, and bedded down for the night on the bare floor, using my overcoat



as a blanket. The bench above me gave me protection from people who might otherwise step on me in the darkness. Uncomfortable on the hard, cold floor, I slept fitfully, struggling all night to get some oxygen for my lungs.

The next morning I awoke early. My entire body ached. My muscles were sore, my stomach was empty, the air around me was awful; the future looked gloomy.

An order came to assemble outside. Again on the march, I belatedly realized that I lost my cap and was now bareheaded. The date was September 19, the first day of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. My thoughts went back to previous holidays and the festive meals my mother prepared for that holiday. Not surprisingly my empty at the moment stomach fed my imagination with the vivid pictures of the traditional meals I enjoyed only a short time ago.

After several hours of marching our group arrived at Rawa Mazowiecka, a largely Jewish town. We stopped for a rest. The German guards steered us into a dead-end street. There I witnessed a sad spectacle. The Germans caught nearby a group of about a dozen orthodox Jewish men, on their way home from the synagogue. They herded them into our street, delivering them thus into the hands of the Polish soldiers. Their intentions were clear, and the Poles did not disappoint them. The mob, goaded on by the Germans, pounced on the helpless victims, while others laughed. The terrified victims were forced to give up their meager possessions, after which they were finally released, suffering "only" some bruises and torn garments.

Their appetite for mischief aroused, some Poles began to search for more victims, this time among their own comrades. They found a few and amidst jeers and catcalls began to beat them.



It was a scary moment for me, but luckily I was not recognized as a Jew. For the moment I was safe.

But I was very disturbed and bitter about my Polish compatriots. I recalled that only a week earlier, a Polish officer objected vehemently against attempts by the soldiers to abuse a captured German. And here, when their own fellow citizens and even colleagues were maltreated, not a single voice rose to defend them. If there were some decent souls in the group, they were apparently intimidated by the mob of ignorant soldiers, eager to find scapegoats for their frustrations.

I was relieved when the Germans brought trucks and ordered us to climb up. A few hours later we drove through the second largest city of Poland, Lodz. This industrial center had the look of a defeated, peopleless shell. We did not stop there, but continued to the next industrial city, Pabianice. There we were taken to a large factory yard, and ordered to disembark.

Our captors finally assembled the POW's into a soupline. The crowd was enormous. There was pushing and shoving. The German soldiers run around, trying<sup>g</sup>, without much success, to keep the line orderly. They yelled and cursed, occasionally hitting prisoners with their rifle butts. The first few hundred prisoners were lucky enough to<sup>get</sup> some chunks of meat in their "soup", which appeared to be just hot water. But, as the starved crowd moved on, the Germans kept adding water to the soup-kettles. The meat<sup>2</sup> kept getting scarcer and scarcer, and when my turn came I received just hot water with a little meat flavor. I was still despe-

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<sup>2</sup>—Dead horses, killed in bombardment, served as the source of that meat. Horse meat is widely used for human consumption in Europe.



rately hungry and was planning to sneak again into the line but I quickly changed my mind when I encountered a fellow prisoner with a bloody head, a result of a beating he received for trying to do just that.

September 20 was my last day in Poland. Toward evening the German guards escorted us to a former political prison in the town of Sieradz. There, before the war, the Polish government kept incarcerated communists and other dissenters. The prison was in shambles. Apparently the prisoners broke out of the facility in the chaotic conditions of the last few days, and the results were quite visible. Of special interest to me was a sizable pile of books that somebody threw out into the center of the prison yard. This must have been the prison library. Some volumes on top of the pile were wet, but most were in decent shape. I helped myself to several volumes of Polish classics, which I stuffed into my shoulder bag and somehow managed to take with me to Germany. I noticed that several other prisoners did the same.

In the basement of the prison we discovered bales of prison gray cloth, which was manufactured there by the inmates. Many of my fellow POW's helped themselves to pieces of the cloth. I myself got hold of some of the material, and with the help of a needle and thread fashioned on the spot a primitive vest to keep me warm in the coming cold weather. I also found a round prison cap, which replaced my lost overseas cap, and now kept my head warm again.

Next morning the Germans took us to a railroad siding, where each of us received a loaf of bread and a package of margarine of Polish manufacture, known as Ceres, which was very hard and



normally was used for cooking and baking. But the bread with bits of the margarine was nourishing, and at least partially stilled my perpetual hunger.

The Germans loaded us into a long freight train, my first experience with that mode of transportation. Sixty of us were assigned to each car. Bundled down on some straw, covered with my overcoat, my journey to Germany began.

### Stalags

After an all night trip, which seemed to me to last forever, the train finally came to a stop. The human cargo was quickly unloaded and put in formation. It was a great relief to be able to stretch, after the confining, crowded car. I looked around and saw a sign giving the name of the place. We were in Hansdorf.

After a short march, our column arrived at our destination, a barbed wire enclosed camp, designated, by a large sign, to be Stalag 1A.<sup>3</sup>

The camp was quite primitive. A row of large tents stretched the length of the place. There were watchtowers on all four corners and a latrine at one end. We spent there an unremarkable day, just mingling about, and talking. In the evening, they gave us a meager potato soup, after which we retired to the assigned tents, where we slept on wooden pallets covered with straw mattresses.

The Stalag at Hansdorf apparently could not accomodate us,

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<sup>3</sup> Stalag is a contraction of the German word "Stammlager"-regular camp; a POW camp.



because next morning, after a quick "breakfast" of bitter ersatz coffee and a slice of bread, we were marched off to the railroad station. Again on a freight train, we moved on to our next destination.

In the evening our transport arrived at Fallingbomel, a place somewhere between Bremen and Hanover, in northern Germany. Our new camp, designated as Stalag XI b, was an exact copy of the previous one. Each of the huge tents accommodated about 400 POW's. Here, too, we slept on straw pallets, covered by blankets of the thinnest variety, and our overcoats. Our uniforms served as our pillows. The food was skimpy, and we were constantly hungry. There was not much to do and days passed slowly.

One morning I was ordered to join a group of men and a middle aged German soldier led us to a nearby forest to gather wood for fuel, probably for the camp kitchen. We entered the woods. It was the beginning of October, and the trees were ablaze with color. There was a wonderful stillness in the air, only interrupted by ~~XXXXX~~, the chirping of birds. This would have been a wonderful place to have a picnic, to relax. The beauty of this place made me want to cry. The contrast between this lovely place and our condition was too much to bear.

After several hours we were ordered to gather our wood and return to camp. On the way we passed a charming house, with a fenced-in garden in front. A middle aged woman came out of the house, carrying a basketful of beautiful apples, which she apparently intended to distribute to us. To our dismay, the German guard rebuffed the good woman and ordered her to return to her house with her apples.

A little further on the road we noticed several trees full of



ripe apples. We stopped and shook a young tree which yielded some of its burden. This time our guard looked the other way, and we filled our pockets with the fragrant fruit. Apparently the soldier had orders to keep away any civilians from us, but had no objections to our apple picking on public land.

Our group reached the camp, and I returned to my tent. There I discovered, to my consternation, that my precious overcoat, which I left neatly folded on my "Strohsack" that morning, was gone. On inquiry, my neighbors pointed to a fellow prisoner, with an unpleasant visage, as the culprit who took my coat. I went over to the thief and demanded the immediate return of my coat. The "Christian" Pole started to shout vile abuses. He was entitled to my coat because I was a "Żyd"<sup>4</sup>. "I am not going to return your coat," he declared flatly.

I was deeply embittered by this thievery, under the guise of antisemitism. Actually, after the event I witnessed at Rawa Mazowiecka, I should not have been surprised. Still, the shock was there, I suppose because it affected me directly. Besides, until this incident, relations between the Jewish and Christian prisoners were rather cordial.

After I calmed down, I made a complaint to the Polish sergeant, who was in charge of our tent. A decent man, he managed to persuade the thief to return my coat. I felt much better. The loss of an overcoat could have had serious consequences, in our condition, with winter approaching fast.

Most of the time there was not much to do in the Stalag. The books I brought from prison at Sieradz were most helpful. Since childhood I was an avid reader, and my appetite for reading material was very rarely satisfied. After I finished reading, hungrily,

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<sup>4</sup> A Polish term which, depending on tone of voice, could mean either Jew or Yid.



my five or six books, I was able to exchange them for other titles with prisoners, quite rare in the camp, who shared my passion for reading.

Another source of reading matter was provided by the camp latrine, of all places. The camp administration did not provide the prisoners with such luxury items as toilet paper. What they did was to cut up German newspapers into strips and hang these on a long nail. Whenever I had an occasion to go to the latrine, I would snatch a whole bunch of these rather large strips of newspaper fragments and sneak them back into the tent. The "Voelki'sche Beobachter" (People's Observer), and other Nazi organs provided interesting morsels for my hungry mind, as well as news from the front. The only problem was that rarely did I find a complete story, only tantalizing bits and snatches of news and propaganda. But at least it was something.

This latrine was also a source of another kind of amusement. The facility was a rather primitive affair, as they usually are. On the edge of a large rectangular hole a board was placed on two supports. There was some sort of roof, but no walls and no privacy. On Sundays whole families of German civilians would come to the rear of the barbed wire fence to gape at the "Polacks". Since the latrine was located close to that fence, the Germans, including women and children, had a very colorful view of camp life. What was so interesting about these civilian Germans, they were not at all embarrassed or bashful. As a matter of fact, I frequently heard loud laughter coming from the crowd.

Days passed uneventfully. Food was inadequate, nights were getting longer and colder, and we were still in unheated tents. The morale was low.



Then, suddenly, on the 27th of October 1939, a little over a month after our arrival here, some of us were removed to another camp. Stalag Xla, at Altengrabow, near Berlin, was a huge place, with brick buildings, dating back to W.W.I. (This camp achieved later some notoriety, when, after the fall of France, Maurice Chevalier came to entertain the French POW's, interned here. Partially for that reason, Chevalier was accused later of collaborating with the enemy.)

My memories of that place were of the most awful hunger, the worst I experienced so far, perhaps the worst in my life. There was practically no food distributed there and nothing to do. A terrible emptiness in the belly was my constant companion. The ground in the camp, compressed over time by countless feet of the imprisoned, was rock-hard, without a blade of grass to cheer one up.

Every day I took long walks, trying to forget the nagging hunger. Once I observed a group of German soldiers amusing themselves by throwing bits of bread over the fence and watching a desperate crowd of Poles fight over the crumbs. The loud laughter of the Germans was absolutely revolting.

I was in this dreadful place for one week, but it felt like eternity. Once, as I took my usual walk, I unexpectedly encountered a friend from Warsaw. We greeted each other warmly. Sam and I chatted for a while about our situation, then he gave me a small metal box with black pills in it. He advised me to chew them slowly, to ease the hunger pains. These pills, tasting vaguely of licorice, somehow helped me to overcome the worst. I was very grateful to my friend, for whom I searched the next day, but could not find him. He simply vanished, never to be seen by me again.



## Genthin Sugar Mill

At the beginning of November, when the biting chill in the air could hardly be overcome by our starving bodies, four hundred of us, all Jews, were selected to be sent to a sugar mill. What a relief! Sugar would offer us loads of desperately needed calories, just right for the fast approaching winter. I knew that another week or two at Altengrabow would mean the end of me.

On November 3, 1939, our lucky group was transported to the mill by several army trucks. On that first day, fortified by a vegetable soup and a chunk of bread-it felt like heaven- I was eager to absorb some facts about the place.

The sugar mill, one of the largest in Germany, and located in the town of Genthin, not far from Berlin, once belonged to a Jewish industrialist. Now, with the Nazi rule, the vast property was taken over by the state.

The mill had its own railroad siding, and a canal linked it to the river Elbe. Freight trains brought in coal, coke and other supplies, while barges <sup>carried</sup> sugar beets and other goods. The finished product was shipped out on the emptied freight cars and barges.

Our new camp was located in the factory itself, in a large hall, where iron cots, equipped with straw mattresses, served as our beds. Long tables on one side served as our dining area.

After we settled down for the night, some of us began to speculate on the reasons for selecting only Jews for this place. In our hearts we knew that we cannot trust Nazi intentions regarding Jews. In any case, we decided that ~~that~~ the only possible advantage to the Germans for selecting only Jews for this place was our ability to understand German. Practically all of us spoke Yiddish, and so German was less of a problem to us than it would



be for Christian Polcs. As for me, I had taken German at school, and now, forced to speak it daily. I became quite fluent in its use.

The morning after our arrival we met our camp commandant, an elderly, benign looking veteran of WW1, with the rank of a Feldfebel. He lectured to us about our duties, and warned us sternly against stealing of sugar. The work schedule sounded very tough: we were to work 12 hour shifts daily, six days a week. Every two weeks each shift would have to switch to the next group, by working 18 hours! On such days a given shift would have to start at six in the morning or at midnight, depending on the given group. After 18 hours of work, only interrupted for a brief meal, we would "enjoy" a rest of 18 hours. It sounded pretty bad.

I was assigned to an outdoor job, shoveling coal into a small lorry, which moved on a narrow gage track between the loading area, a large mound of coal, and the mill. There were always two lorries to be filled. I had to fill one, and a civilian Silesian Volksdeutsche worked on the second.

That civilian, a muscular, well fed fellow, shoveled the coal like an obsessed maniac. Silesia was a mining area, and he probably did that sort of work all his life. It was impossible for me to keep up with him. After a few hours of this backbreaking work, I was ready to collapse. In desperation, without much thought of the possible consequences, i hurled myself to the ground right there, at the foot of that black, dusty mound.

A civilian "Meister" (supervisor) and a guard were summoned and they ordered to take me back to the camp. They asked me quite decently what happened and I explained to them that I was unable to keep up with that Silesian miner. They smiled and shook their



heads. Next morning I was given another assignment.

This time I worked in the mill yard, loading a small lorry with limestones, using a pitchfork. But here I was on my own, doing the hard work at my own pace. When a lorry was filled up, the load had to be pushed on narrow tracks to an elevator. From there the <sup>lorry</sup> was lifted up to the top of a huge furnace.

After a few days of hard, but bearable toil, I was shifted to a much better job, the servicing of the furnace on the top floor. I was now working indoors, where a welcome warmth prevailed. My duties were quite strange. In the center of a large hall, a bellshaped cover protected the furnace opening. When a lorry with the load of limestones arrived in the elevator, it was my job to get the lorry, still on tracks, to the furnace, lift the cover by cranking a large handle, and to dump the stones into the burning inferno of the oven, always remembering to add 13 shovelfulls of coke, which served as<sup>a</sup> burning agent, (the limestones, understandably, did not burn by themselves) and then to lower the bell cover.

As a person always interested in finding out how things work I inquired about that strange furnace, and its function. This was the explanation given to me by my supervisor, a German civilian: in normal times the calcium needed to refine sugar was extracted from animal bones. The Germans did not have enough of that commodity. The next best thing was to utilize limestones. Subjected to high temperatures the limestone turned into a fine powder which yielded the calcium needed for the refining process.

The supervisor was a decent, friendly man, who was kindly, and occasionally treated me to an apple or a part of his sandwich.

But this kindly "Meister" would turn cold and indifferent when



another German was present in the hall. It was obvious to me that these people mistrusted each other, ~~and~~ played it safe, when others were around.

It was at that sugar mill that I developed certain habits which served me well in the days to come. Many of my colleagues, under the oppressive conditions of the place gave up on personal appearances, rarely shaved or kept clean. Personal grooming was difficult, but not impossible in the camp, and I did my best to take care of my appearance. Shaving had to be accomplished by the use of ordinary soap and one safety blade which I somehow managed to keep fairly sharp.

I quickly learned that external appearances often influenced the attitudes of the German masters toward us. The sight of an unshaven, untidy looking individual, often wrapped in a blanket, with feet covered with rags, invariably evoked the contempt of the immaculately dressed and polished guards, already indoctrinated to believe in our "inferiority".

This realization prompted me to a decision then, that I must do my utmost to try to keep neat and clean, whatever the circumstances. This effort also helped me to maintain my own self-respect.

That tough, cold winter of 1939-40, I was sometimes comandered to work outdoors in extremely cold weather. Sometimes I was lucky to work in a boxcar, unloading coal into lorries, sweating heavily from the effort, despite the bitter cold outside.

Usually two or three of us were assigned to empty a wagon load of coal. We would start at the open door and move on deeper as the emptying of the wagon progressed. Once we were inside the car, we were better protected from the cold, eventually reaching the point when we began to sweat from the hard work, despite the



numbing cold outside.

generally a day's work<sup>was needed 31</sup> to empty a car.

Sometimes I was less lucky, being forced to work exposed to the elements. Whatever the given situation was, I refused to wrap myself in a blanket, or use rags to protect my feet, as many did. The availability of sugar, so rich in calories, helped enormously, I am sure, in my struggle against adverse conditions.

Sugar was literally our savior. Most of the POW's worked in areas where sugar was not directly available. Those fortunate enough to work where sugar was the end product, were, naturally, able to eat some. But it was strictly forbidden to remove any of it from the working area. However, there were several husky fellows whose task was to load sacks full of the precious commodity into freight trains or trucks. When Germans were not around, these porters would deliberately drop a bag to the ground, which caused it to burst. They would then quickly fill some hidden places on their bodies<sup>ies</sup> with the sugar, and smuggle it into the camp.

I marvelled at the ingenuity of my fellow sufferers, and our ability to adapt to these *tough* conditions. Unknown to the German authorities, a lively trade in sugar developed as a regular feature of our camp life. Every two weeks we received our pay in special scrip, marked "Kriegsgefangenengelt", (POW money) which looked very much like play money, used by children. The only place where we could spend our money was at the camp canteen, where we could obtain beer, "*Schnecken*" (a form of sweet bun) or candy. The sugar dealers accepted that scrip for their merchandise.

All of us quickly adapted a habit of heavily sweetening our food; beer, bread, soup, ersatz coffee, all became overloaded with the sweet substance. Some fellows would put so much sugar into their coffee, that they wereXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.



forced to eat it, literally, with a spoon. we led a "sweet" life. The eating of all this sugar was probably not very healthy for us, but at least it provided fuel for our energy needs. As a result, the lack of a balanced diet did not affect most of us too much at the moment.

As I recall, only once was I assigned to work directly with sugar. In that new for me area, a conveyor belt carried semi-refined sugar to its next stage. The temptation was too great. Before leaving for the camp, I filled a small cloth bag with the sweet, light brown crystals, and attached it to my belt. Knowing that the Germans inspect the returning POW's, I pushed the bag to the rear and put my military overcoat over my shoulders. The trick worked. The elderly "Hilfs-Polizei" (Auxilliary Police) officer searched me, but <sup>did</sup> not reach to the back. I returned safely to my bunk, where I retrieved my sweet loot.

Forever on the lookout for new sources of nourishment, some of our people discovered that sugar beets, while tough and bitter tasting when raw, were quite palatable when baked. The problem was to find a suitable place to bake them. The huge oven, where I worked for a while, provided the answer.

The oven had little windows for inspection purposes. These windows, conveniently located on each floor, were easy to open. The thick walls offered a large enough ledge, just right ~~XXXXXX~~ to accomodate a couple of beets. After several hours of baking these beets turned dark brown, soft and delicious to eat.

Occasionally an assign<sup>ment</sup> could turn out to be perilous. Once I was ordered, along with a group of other prisoners to unload a barge full of cement. There was a narrow plank, connecting the barge to the shore. I didn't know how to swim and was really



scared that time. One coworker advised me: "Don't look down <sup>33</sup> at your feet, when crossing the plank. Just look straight ahead." But how does one walk a narrow plank without looking at it?

The heavy load of a cement bag on my shoulders and the dread of slipping and falling into the cold and murky waters below gave me an acute sense of freight. Somehow I managed to cross that dreadful plank many times that day, without slipping once.

As a prisoner of war, I was eventually permitted to send and receive mail. I wrote a number of censored post cards, and to my joy, received several pieces of mail from my family and friends. They were happy that I was alive, because they almost gave up hope. The letters from them ~~were~~ <sup>were</sup> a powerful ~~XXXX~~ boost to my morale. My parents were still in Warsaw, in the same place. My older brother David, who volunteered to fight the invaders, was wounded in the battle for Warsaw. He was now recovering from a leg wound at the well known Jewish hospital known as Czyste. My oldest brother Julian and my youngest brother Joseph were now under Soviet occupation, Julian at Suwalki, with his wife's family, and Joseph working at a lumbermill, somewhere near Lwow, thus safe from German clutches.

My friend Bronka also wrote and apparently was well. She remained in Warsaw with her mother and little sister, but reported that her father and brother escaped to the Soviet Union, and lived near Crimea.

#### Return to Altengrabow

In the middle of February 1940, we had a surprise. An order came to prepare for departure from Genthin. Our commandant, the mild mannered Feldfebel, announced the news with sadness. He got to like his job, and became friendly with a number of our people.



He was particularly close to the ranking prisoner, a master sergeant, who was the head of our group.

The Felfebel didnot know the reason for the sudden change but indicated that the mill would be forced to curtail its regular production for lack of manpower. This was the first instance, in my experience, of an irrational Nazi policy involving Jews. I was destined to see more of such behavior later, but this being the beginning of 1940, we could have only the vaguest inkling of their intent toward us.

Our camp leaders organized a banquet of sorts, in honor of the good Feldfebel. There was beer, schnecken, and speeches in praise of the humane commandant. It was a friendly affair, far removed from the future events.

On the 24th of February we left the sugar mill and were taken to that dreadful StalagXla at Altengrabow. The next eight days were filled with anxiety and confusion. Nobody knew what to make of it, when thousands of POWs, all Jewish, turned up at the Stalag, brought here from all over Germany. <sup>5</sup>

We lined up daily, to wait for our turn to be interrogated by German officers seated at long tables, busy making lists of names. After a while a pattern emerged which told us something of what was happening here.

The Germans were apparently attempting to divide us into three groups, based on our place of origin. One group consisted of those who lived in the western Poland, now integrated into the Third Reich. The next group, to which I belonged, was formed of prisoners who lived in the central part of Poland, now called "Generalgouvernement", with Cracow as its capital. Finally, the last group was composed of all those Jewish POWs who lived in that part of Poland that was now occupied by the Soviet Union.



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Some of the prisoners from the first two groups opted to register in the Soviet section, hoping to get away from the Nazis. Since we had no documents, this wasn't difficult to accomplish; of neccessity the Germans had to take <sup>our</sup> ~~their~~ word for it.

One personable young man, whose parents owned a well known in Warsaw bakery and pastry shop, Brothers Studnia, which was located in my neighborhood, registered as a native of Lwow (Lemberg) then and now under Soviet rule, but a Polish city in the inter-war period.

Later in the war it became clear to me, based on discussions I had with people I encountered in various camps, that the two groups, from the annexed Western Poland and the Soviet zone, never got home. The first group was almost completely wiped out. The Jewish prisoners from the Soviet-occupied Poland never had a chance. The Germans had no intention to supply able-bodied men, capable of serving in the Red army, to the Soviet state. They were send, instead, to the notorious Lipowa Street camp at Lublin, and only a handful managed to survive. Some of them I was destined to meet, under different circumstances, later.

#### Return to Warsaw

In the early morning of March 3rd, 1940, about two thousand of us, all from the "Generalgouvernement", were loaded into a freight train, and towards evening of the same day our transport reached Warsaw.

Most of the returnees were ordinary soldiers, but there was also in our ranks a very visible group of officers, lieutenants, majors and colonels, mainly professionals such as physicians, engineers and lawyers, who became mobilized, when the Germans



invaded Poland.

We were taken to the court-yard of the newly formed Juden-rat, located in the pre-war building of the Kehilla, on Grzybowska street. There we were duly registered and given a brief ceremonial welcome by the Jewish officials. Late in the evening we were permitted to go home to our families. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

→ The German officials never bothered to explain to us the reasons for sending us home. However, later, when the full extent of the Nazi plans regarding Jews became clearer, I came to the conclusion, which I believe to be correct, that the Nazis simply did not <sup>wish</sup> to accord to us, Jewish POWs, the protection we were entitled to under the universally adhered to Geneva Convention. By sending us home, they turned us into civilians, subject to the same treatment as other civilian Jews. The other two groups were disposed of by sending them elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

A new chapter opened up for me. I was again in my beloved Warsaw, with my family and friends. My parents, who by that time were alone, greeted me with open arms.

#### My family, my Warsaw

In 1927, when I was ten years old, my family moved from Lublin, where I was born at the end of World War 1, to Warsaw, in search of a better life. What we found was, unfortunately, more poverty. My father, Aron Szama, was a fiercely honest and pious Jew, who attended the prayer house three times a day. A man of average height and a rather lean frame, he used to dress in the traditional garb of Polish Jews, a longish black frock, known as a capote, with a round black cap, narrow visored, always on his head. His face, framed by an infrequently



<sup>5</sup>There was, probably, another reason for their action: to provide space for new POWs, since Hitler was planning to invade the Western European countries a few month later.



trimmed dark beard, <sup>speckled with grey</sup> spoke of hard work and few joys. While in his quiet ways he prevailed in religious matters, he preferred to yield to my mother in family affairs. Chana Leach, born Fidelman, my mother, was a handsome woman of medium height and built. In conformity with the tradition of the period, she wore a wig over her own hair, and dressed modestly. Of the eight children she bore, she succeeded in bringing up six, four sons and two daughters, while two died in childbirth. She was a good, devoted, forever worrying mother, but she was often arguing with my father whom she blamed for the financial woes we faced most of the time. I could only guess what hardships my parents went through while we were growing up.

A man more devoted to his God than to his trade, my father, a tailor, failed to make a decent living for his family. His main income came from repairing and remodeling used clothing for mostly poor customers.

A practice, unknown in the prosperous USA, remodeling used clothing by turning it inside out, was <sup>widely used</sup> ~~used~~ by people in impoverished parts of eastern Europe. Occasionally, my father would also get work from shopkeepers to produce ready made garments. This form of production was known in Polish as "chalupniks" (cottage industry), where the shopkeeper supplied the ready cut parts, and my father put them together.

We lived at the time in the heart of Jewish Warsaw, at 34 Nalewki street. The street was a busy commercial center, with major textile and haberdashery shops in front, and a bewildering variety of small shops in the yards and <sup>the</sup> on upper floors. Wholesale cosmetics, umbrellas, notions, various trade supplies, paper goods, bindery shops, religious articles, shoe ~~stores~~ stores, they were all there.



Many buildings on our street, as on the adjoining streets, had several yards, most of them crammed with similar shops, others used for residential purposes.

Now, under the impact of the German restrictions, many of these trade activities came to a complete halt. The first to suffer were the large textile shops. At the time of my return, I frequently saw military trucks in front of these stores, busy loading confiscated bales of cloth. Eventually the supply of these goods dried up and the stores had to close.

In some cases, rumors had it, where merchandise, such as bales of fine woolens, were hidden by the merchants, the same porters who helped to hide the goods, were now guiding the Germans to the hiding places, enticed by extra food rations, or other rewards. In fairness it must be said that only some of the porters stooped so low. The bulk of these porters, known in Warsaw as "tregers", <sup>(carriers)</sup> was quite militant, well organized, and, in interwar Poland, often engaged in fighting antisemitic gangs.

The upper floors, not occupied by shops, were used as living quarters. A typical apartment would consist of a bedroom, or two, a living room, and a kitchen. The sparse amenities usually included a cold water faucet and sink, a coal stove; in more affluent places a tiled tall stove to warm the rooms in winter. Toilets, dingy and often poorly kept, were as a rule located in the backyards. There was also a large receptacle for garbage disposal in the yard. The only baths available were either public establishments or mikvas, the ritual baths for the religious, which often dubbed as Turkish baths or saunas. Needless to say, these conditions resulted in rather poor hygienic habits of the people trapped in them. It should be recalled, however, that this situation existed at that time in most older cities of Europe, both East and West.



We lived in a two room apartment. One large room served as a living room, dining room, bedroom, as well as a workplace for my father; the other was a small kitchen. My father's major work tools were a foot driven Singer sewing machine, a charcoal heated pressing iron, which emitted an unpleasant smoke, when in use, and large scissors.

One heavy mahogany table, which occupied the center of the room, was almost always crowded with unfinished articles of clothing. The table was cleared of its burden only for the Sabbath and major holidays.

Materially my parents' situation was bad; there was little income and the price of food was going up steadily. In a community where commodities were scarce, my father's skills as a tailor were of little use.

My two sisters resided nearby. Both led unenviable lives. Sara, the oldest, tried her best to be a good parent to her four-year old son, a blond darling boy. Golda, blessed with two little girls, had an even harder time to provide for them. Their husbands desperately tried to eke out a living under the impossible conditions of the ghetto, which, while still only in the planning stage, already existed for all practical purposes.

David, two years older than me, was my only brother still in Warsaw. He was closest to me both in age and spirit. We both shared an interest in literature, the arts and politics. At the time of my return from Stalag, David was still recovering from his wound at the Jewish hospital at Czyste.

From time to time my youngest brother, Joseph, was able to send food packages to my parents, but this source dried up after the Soviet Union was attacked by the Germans in June of 41.



Such luxuries as honey and chocolate were particularly welcome in these packages.

I faced the difficult task of adjusting to these serious conditions, and I was determined not to become an extra burden on my family. At first I continued to wear my army uniform, hoping in that way to avoid the compulsory star of David armband. For a while it worked, but eventually I abandoned that risky idea. The Germans and their helpers, the Polish police, could arrest me and I would be in real trouble. I did not think the risk was warranted under the circumstances. Reluctantly I switched to civilian clothing and the hated armband on my right sleeve.

Life in Warsaw was still semi-normal, the closed ghetto yet many months away. On occasion I would shed my "incriminating" Jewish armband and make forays into the forbidden "Aryan" sector to purchase food not available in the Jewish quarters. One such memorable trip brought me to the only department store then in existence, Brothers Jablowski. I bought live carp, and ersatz honey (made from brown sugar), for our 1940 Passover holidays.

But that "normality" was quite illusory. Life in the Jewish enclave was getting harder with each passing day. The Nazi policy of constant harassment and the difficulty of making a living in the smaller towns, forced many Jewish families to move to Warsaw, where they were hoping to find greater safety in numbers.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the congestion in the Jewish sector became quite

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<sup>6</sup> In light of later events, this was a deliberate German policy the aim of which it was to concentrate Jews in large cities, from which mass deportations could be arranged more easily.



unbearable.

The economic life of the Jewish sector in Warsaw, under these conditions, underwent a marked change. Few people could now afford expensive, well made garments or shoes. The scarcity of raw materials forced many artisans and small entrepreneurs to concentrate on recycling of various commodities.

Even before the war a sizable part of the population of Warsaw, both Jewish and non-Jewish, depended on this kind of merchandise. There were several popular <sup>outdoor</sup> markets in Warsaw, where poor people made their purchases. One such place, known as Wolówka, located on the fringes of the Jewish neighborhood of Muranow, held hundreds of stalls selling a variety of goods, most of it recycled, some also new but of inferior quality.

Nothing was wasted. Used clothing, shoes, hats and other items of clothing were repaired, patched up and resold. The fiercely competing merchants tried hard to lure customers to their particular stalls. Some of the methods these merchants used to make a sale were almost legendary, if somewhat unethical. One particularly clever trick was to deposit some loose change in the pocket of a garment. An ignorant customer would try out the garment, find the change and, unwilling to part with it, wound up paying a higher price, even if the garment did not fit too well.

This was the scene before the war. Now, with the German rulers confiscating everything in sight, many more people depended on that kind of inferior clothing. This was reflected in the appearance of the people in the street. Many of the once fashionably dressed women looked now gray and shabby. Patched garments, once the unmistakable mark of numerous beggars, were now worn by many impoverished individuals.



But even in that bleak period some people managed to squeeze out a relatively decent living from the adversity. The Gezundhajts belonged to that group. Mr. Gezundhajt, a decent, soft spoken individual, run a rug collecting and sorting enterprise, which the shortage of raw materials elevated to an essential part of the local economy.

Before the war my brother David and I maintained friendly relationships with their children. There were three girls and a boy who was the youngest. One of the girls, Bella, a slim, warmhearted twenty year old charmer, was my brother's fiancée.

She was totally devoted to my brother, and visited him at the hospital almost daily, never failing to bring him a home made, nourishing meal. David was making good progress, and we were all hoping to see him home soon.

The hospital, a famous Jewish institution, was located well outside the traditional Jewish area of Warsaw. One day Bella, unable for some reason to make the trip herself, asked me to take some hot food to David. In order to get there I had to board a trolley, in Polish known as a "tramwaj." There I encountered Polish hostility, for which I was not prepared. Quite unexpectedly I was forced to jump off the moving trolley by a menacing Pole who barked; "Get off, you kike, you don't belong here!" while pushing me through the open door. I was shaken but unhurt. As an experienced Varsovian I knew how to get off a moving trolley, without getting hurt, a skill necessitated by the fact that even before the war, trolleys were always overcrowded, and clusters of people often clung to the open doors, while precariously perched on the entrance steps.

A while later, David came home, lean, but in good spirits, and



supporting himself on a crutch. He had still a plaster cast and metal brace on his leg. A little opening in the cast provided access to his wound, which had to be cleaned and covered with gauze daily. A few weeks later the wound healed and I assisted David in removing the plaster cast. We used vinegar to soften the plaster and my father's shears to cut it open. Vigorous massaging and daily walks rehabilitated his legs almost completely.

Meanwhile, rumors spread that the Germans were planning to create a Ghetto in our city. At first there were only signs put up by them around the perimeters of the Jewish area proclaiming the streets off limits to Germans, both civilians and soldiers, because of alleged typhus epidemic. This was the infamous "Seuchensperrgebiet" (Infectious disease-closed area).

Still, German soldiers often came to the area to amuse themselves. Their particular pleasure was to slap bearded Jews, or to cut parts of their beards with scissors. Sometimes they grabbed handbags from Jewish women, to hand them over to their Polish girlfriends, who probably goaded them into doing it anyway. Some orthodox men took to hiding their faces behind kerchiefs, pretending to have toothaches, when they ventured out into the street. My own father resorted to that camouflage a few times, as I remember.

All Jews, orthodox or not, were fair game to these young, arrogant Germans. This I learned personally one morning, while I was walking on Muranowska street. Without warning I was suddenly slapped in the face so violently that my hat flew off my head and landed in the gutter. Shocked, I turned around to see a soldier, his face full of hate, barking "Verdammtte Jude" (cursed Jew). My "crime" was unforgivable: I failed to take off my <sup>head</sup> ~~text~~ covering. when he passed me.



I picked up my hat and walked on, my cheeks inflamed from the powerful slap and humiliation.

Taking off one's hat was not enough for some Germans. They also demanded that Jews step into the gutter when passing a member of the "master race". To avoid this kind of encounter, many people took to crossing the street, if they saw a German approaching.

Although the official German proclamation announcing the creation of the Ghetto came out in October, preparations for it started much earlier. Among other measures, the most devastating was the order to relocate those Jews who lived in the "aryan" areas, to the future "Wohnbezirk". Christians in the Jewish neighborhoods were told to move out.

This unprecedented situation caused a lot of anxiety among the people being uprooted. Material losses were considerable. Most Jews were driven out with only the barest minimum of their possessions, while the Poles, and in cases of more elegant apartments, the Germans, took over their homes. When an appeal for help was issued, I volunteered to assist people to move their belongings to the designated area.

On one of the assignments, on my way to Praga, a suburb of the city across the Vistula river, I and a companion had to pass the City Hall, on Theater Square. Absorbed in our thoughts we forgot, unfortunately, to remove our hats. The gendarme on duty in front of the building called us over, and, with a malicious smile, ordered us to report to the guardhouse. We knew we were in trouble.

Once inside the guardhouse, another gendarme, without bothering to ask us anything, knocked the hats out of our hands to the floor, and barked an order to start a drill "um-auf" (down-up).



To the accompaniment of a radio blaring martial music, he accelerated his "um-auf", and we two were forced to drop on our hands and knees to the floor, rise up and down again, quicker and quicker. The palms of my hands began to bleed from constantly hitting the concrete floor.

When our tormentor got tired of yelling "um-auf", he called in another comrade from an adjoining room. The torture went on for some 25-30 minutes, but to ~~us~~ it seemed like eternity. Finally we were told to get lost. We hastily left the guardhouse. On the way out, we saw two other Jews entering the torture chamber. For a long time after that incident I avoided wearing a hat, when out on the street. The memory of these malevolent gendarmes, with their "um-aufs", haunted me for a long time. Until worse things came...

← Here add the Esperanto story.  
add title for that episode

The Drugstore

Upward mobility, as it is known in the U.S.A., and made possible by access to higher education, was practically unknown in prewar Poland. My family's financial situation precluded any chance for a n improvement in my social status. When in 1931, in my seventh grade, I was picked, along with two other pupils, to undergo extensive intelligence tests at the Warsaw University, my hopes soared. As a direct result of these tests I was admitted to a state run high school, from which I graduated in 1935. Further support did not materialize; I ~~was~~ forced to look for work.

In quick succession I was a welder in a metal shop, a book-binder in a bookbindery, and an apprentice in an eyeglassframe



Insert the Esperanto story on page 45, before the Drugstore section

I Learn Esperanto Wild street is renamed Zamenhof street

In the spring of 1931, when I was fourteen years old, and living in Warsaw, I became briefly involved in the Esperanto movement.

I was then attending the seventh and last grade of a government supported Jewish public school on Grzybowska street. The school was fortunate to have a fine group of Jewish teachers (classes were conducted in Polish), and one of them, Mr. Rosenthal, persuaded the school principal, Dr. Geo Hecht, to let our graduating class take up the study of Esperanto, invented some fifty years earlier by a Warsaw oculist (ophtalmologist), Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof.

Mr. Rosenthal, a very intelligent, capable teacher, was quite enthusiastic about Esperanto, believing, along with many individuals of that period, that an international language was the wave of the future. A caring teacher, he wanted his pupils to get the best education possible, and considered knowing Esperanto a part of that education.

He engaged a popular at the time Esperanto activist, a Mr. Grossman, to teach us that language. Within six weeks most of us acquired a rudimentary knowledge of the artificial tongue, able to converse a bit, and write brief essays. After graduation, each of us received a certificate in Polish and Esperanto, attesting to our accomplishment.

About that time an International Esperanto Congress was held in Cracow, in southern Poland. Afterwards, most of the participants came to Warsaw, where events were planned by the



city to honor Zamenhof. A number of our Esperanto graduates were assigned to assist the delegates during that Postcongress. I was assigned to two guests, one a Frenchman from Algiers, the other a Tokyo University dean, to be their guide and interpreter.

When I, a mere fourteen year old youngster, was introduced to these two foreigners, I was, naturally, very apprehensive. My worries quickly dissipated; the limited knowledge of Esperanto that I so recently acquired proved quite adequate. Of great help was the fact, that knowing some basic rules makes it possible to create and extend even a very limited vocabulary, by the judicious use of prefixes, suffixes, and proper word endings.

The president (mayor) of Warsaw initiated the festivities by renaming a part of Dzika street-pronounced Djeeka-Wild, Zamenhof street. A large crowd, which included Congress delegates, gathered in front of #9 of the newly renamed street, at the building where dr. Zamenhof, from 1886 until his death in 1917, had his medical office. After brief speeches in Polish and Esperanto, amid applause, a plaque was affixed to the front of the building, honoring dr. Zamenhof's achievement.

The crowd then proceeded to the Jewish cemetery, where dr. Zamenhof's gravestone, adorned with the green star of hope, an emblem adopted by the movement, was located. There dr. Zamenhof was eulogized by the leading Esperantists. The official part of the Postcongress was over. (When, in 1983, I went to Warsaw to participate in the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, I saw the gravestone. It miraculously survived the Nazi wrath toward Esperanto. )

→ Before departing from Poland, my two charges, grateful for my assistance during their stay in Warsaw, invited me to join them



in a meal at the high class Cafe Adria. For a Jewish boy, from a poor family, this was a rare treat.

In the fall of 1945, following liberation from Nazi camps, I briefly visited Warsaw, or rather, what was left of it. Zamenhof street, like the the rest of the former ghetto, was no more. Piles of bricks, partially obscured by ten foot tall weeds, replaced the formerly vibrant street.

In 1983, on the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, I went again to Warsaw. There, right behind the Ghetto monument, I saw a new Zamenhof street. Of course, the street was of recent vintage, but at least the memory of Zamenhof was preserved. While exploring the area I also discovered a street named Esperanto! At the Jewish cemetery the imposing grave-stone of the creator of Esperanto looked well preserved, the green star still intact.



factory. Around 1936, when my aunt Helena's son, Isaac Ajbuszyc, was drafted into the army, he offered me his job in a well known in Warsaw drugstore, owned by Josef Weingart. The drugstore, at the busy corner of Karmelicka and Nowolipki streets, was one of the largest in the city. (I should note here that in Poland, as in Europe in general, drugstores did not dispense prescription drugs. This was the function of pharmacies or apothecaries, "an apteka" in Polish. In a drugstore one bought non-prescription drugs and cosmetics mostly.)

Mr. Weingart, a heavy set man in his fifties, was totally devoted to his store, with few outside interests. He was always busy, either behind the counter, serving customers, or in a back-room, preparing ointments, powders, or floorwax, for which he had his own formula. There was also, as I soon discovered, a secret room in the basement, where prescription drugs, mostly physician's samples, were hidden away.

Beside Mr. Weingart, Czeslaw Drabowicz, a young, personable Pole, who was the senior clerk, often ventured into that secret room, to retrieve some illegally dispensed drug.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Sarah Weingart, the boss's wife, a short, plumpish woman, whose face must have been beautiful in her youth, presided over the cash register. There she alternated with her daughter Ziuta, a friendly, outgoing person, endowed with a finely chiseled, intelligent face.

The staff also included Bronka, the junior sales clerk, and

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<sup>7</sup> This activity was not without consequences. Once, a surprise Health Department inspection discovered the secret room. A few days later I was a witness, along with Mr. Weingart, as a Health Department employee methodically hit each package with a hammer, squashing it to bits. There was probably also a fine.



Elsa Henschel, a tall, extremely thin, thirtyish woman, who worked with Czeslaw. Elsa, a person of German origin, a real "Volksdeutsche", was by choice a patriotic Pole. Even later, under the occupation, she remained an upright, decent Pole. Elsa was very fond of Bronka, and quite friendly with me.

My job involved mostly working in the backroom, under Mr. Weingart's direction, or taking care of errands, which I particularly enjoyed, since they gave me a chance to walk the streets of the city. Three years later, when my job was terminated by the draft, Ziuta, Elsa and Bronka prepared a small farewell party, and I received a nice wristwatch as a parting gift.

#### The outing

Bronka and Elsa still worked in the drugstore when I returned from the Stalags. One day, while Elsa - we called her Ella - was spending some time vacationing in a Warsaw suburb, she asked Bronka to come for a few days. On the last day of Bronka's stay there, I was invited to come. It was risky for a Jew to travel, but the temptation to get out of the depressing city, even if only for a day, was too great to refuse. The prospect of spending several hours with friends, in a more tranquil environment, was most welcome.

I removed my star of David armband, put it in my pocket, and resolutely proceeded to the center of town ~~XXXXXX~~ where the railroad station was located. I boarded the train, arrived at the suburban station without mishaps and began to walk along the railroad tracks, on my way to Ella's rented cottage. An old peasant passed me and greeted me with the traditional "Christ be praised!" I quickly answered "for ever and ever" as if this was a most natural way for me to react. In truth, that was the first time I ever uttered these words.



I reached the place. I found Bronka taking a sunbath in a field of wheat. The day was warm and sunny, the smell of the warm wheat intoxicating. Soon Ella joined us and the three of us fell silent, trying to relax and soak in the sun's benevolent rays. The brief respite from the reality out there was precious.

Later Ella complained to me that Bronka was too daring for her taste-she sunbathed topless! For the conservative Ella this was going too far. I kept my neutrality'the day was too short to get involved in controversies.

We spent a lovely day, and in the evening Bronka and I returned to Warsaw. We left the main railroad station and found ourselves at the principal corner of the city, at Marszałkowska street and Jeruzolimski Blvd. The streets were crowded with strollers, Poles and German soldiers, holding hands of their Polish girlfriends, all enjoying a lovely evening on the town. We had to be careful not to be recognized.

On reaching the Ghetto area, we found ourselves alone on the deserted streets. Our steps on the cobblestones sounded heavy and probably frightened a good many people, huddled behind closed doors and shutters. We belatedly realized that it was foolhardy to attempt such a late return home. Although the Ghetto was still open at the time, there were obvious dangers lurking about. Luckily, we did not encounter any German patrols and <sup>got</sup> safely to our homes.

It was during that relatively peaceful and quiet interlude before the storm, that the Red Cross message about my alleged death arrived. I resolved to frame that document some day, and hang it on the wall as a memento of the war years. What a won-



derful conversation piece that would have been! As events developed, that was not destined to happen.

Two of my closest friends from the prewar period were Natek Kamieniecki and Simcha Rosenbaum. Natek (Nathan) was an extremely intelligent young man, with a magnetic personality, whom I greatly admired. His life was cut short, when, mobilized into the Polish army, he fell in some obscure skirmish, in the first week of the war. I went to see his mother, whose husband was at the time away in Argentina.

A handsome woman, well groomed, she received me with a sad smile. She was glad to see me, but was clearly heartbroken at the irreplaceable loss of her son. Her older son and a daughter managed to escape to the Soviet Union, and she was now alone. It was a very depressing visit, and I left as soon as it was decent to do so.

Simcha, also mobilized, lost a leg in the campaign. We were good friends for years and his tragedy affected both me and my brother David very deeply. As a teenager, and later, until the military service, I used to visit his home frequently, and became very fond also of his two younger sisters, Sara and Guta. The parents, he a powerfully build, but mild individual, she a small, quiet person, were very orthodox, and on Sabbath we had to be on our best behavior. I was very much impressed at the time, by their use of an advanced for those days gadget, a timer that would shut off their lights on Friday nights, on retiring.

I went to see Simcha, and I found a very subdued, depressed young man. He was hobbling with the help of a crutch, and his behavior was very reserved. I sensed that our friendship and closeness were gone. Later I discovered that bitterness was  
XXXXXXXXXXXX



his bitterness was compounded by another matter. Both he and my brother David were in love with Bella. The poor girl, torn between the two, finally decided in David's favor. Simcha assumed, wrongly, I like to think, that he lost out because of his disability. David and Simcha, a bright, well read individual, went now their separate ways. In the process, I also lost a dear friend.

I have no first hand knowledge of the <sup>Rosenbaums'</sup> fate, but have sufficient reasons to presume that the entire family was sent to their deaths in 1942, when thousands of Warsaw Jews were deported to Treblinka. The Rosenbaums originally came from the small, mostly Jewish town of Szydlowiec, and it is safe to assume that the Nazis destroyed the communal record of their birth place. How sad to contemplate that these words are probably the only epitaph recalling that fine Jewish family.

#### A Brief Interlude

Like many young people in the Jewish area at that time, I was periodically caught on the street and <sup>away</sup> taken to perform forced labor. Most of that work was, as a rule, useless, and designed primarily to harass people. Once, I remember, I was taken, with a group, to the Okęcie airport, at the time a Luftwaffe (Air Force) base. We carried heavy boards back and forth, for no good reason.

Conditions in the Jewish quarter deteriorated further. Simple tasks were now so complicated that many poor people conceived of a way to make a "living" by hiring themselves out to perform some of these tasks for the more affluent citizens. The most serious of these was to substitute for the wealthy at forced labor, to which people were assigned, on German orders, by the Judenrat. In normal times this would be considered a corrupt practice, but these were not normal times.



Another form of substitution was to stand in a line for somebody else. This usually involved many hours of standing in some office, waiting for an unfriendly Polish, or worse, German bureaucrat, to take care of some routine matter. As one example, sending a letter abroad was still possible, but one had to appear in person and produce a passport or another document proving citizenship. I went once to the post office to mail a letter to my brother Joseph, who lived just across the border, and had to stand in line a whole day. I could then observe the affluent in line paying others to take over their spot for a few hours.

At first people used to grumble, but eventually they learned to tolerate this kind of behavior. It was basically harmless, and it enabled some poor soul to earn a few zlotys.

#### The Forced Labor Camp Koniskowola

My life took a sudden and fateful turn, when, in the middle of the night of September 17, 1940, there was a loud knock on the door. "Open up, police!" Reluctantly I opened the door and a Polish police officer<sup>8</sup> entered. He was fully armed, with a pistol, rifle and nighstick. "Are you Izaak Arbug? I am here to arrest you on orders of the Arbeits-Amt (Labor Office)."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The Polish police, often brutal and corrupt, and known in Polish as the Granatowa (Navy blue) for their distinctive uniforms, served as an auxilliary force for the occupant.

<sup>9</sup> The Arbeits-Amt was in charge of recruiting (read: kidnapping) for forced labor, both locally, and for deportation to Germany. Only "Aryans" however, were "privileged"<sup>d</sup> to go to Germany. Jews had no such option.



Newly armed with the Red Cross document, I retrieved the paper and handed it to the Pole, hoping that he would just go away. I said: "Can't you see that Izaak Arbuz is dead?" He was adamant. "This is no time for jokes. Come with me!" From his confident tone I concluded that he was probably guided by the list of released Jewish POW's, obtained from the Judenrat, or another source. There was no way out.

I dressed, and, to my parents' despair, left my home to face a new, difficult and decisive chapter in my life.

My police escort took me to the large building of the Arbeits-Amt in Praga. There several hundred young Jews were already assembled. Sleep was out of the question; there was no facility for such luxury anyway. Clusters of detainees animatedly discussed the possible destination of our group, but nobody really knew what was going to happen.

Early next morning, tired from lack of sleep and filled with anxiety, I was cheered by the arrival of Bella and Ella, who, along with many other relatives and friends of the people under arrest, were admitted to the building. The two brave women brought me some clothing and food for the anticipated journey. Grateful, I greeted them like long lost relatives. We chatted for a while, and then it was time to say goodbye. Most of us, somehow assumed that the separation from our families and friends would be brief, which made our leavetaking easier.

Soon we were ordered to line up outside the building, and, under escort, we proceeded to the railroad station. To our great surprise, our escort consisted of the newly formed Jewish police, organized, on German orders, by the Judenrat. This was the first time I encountered these policemen. A motley lot, they



were largely unemployed professionals, lawyers, teachers, engineers and others, who under the Germans were unable to function in their chosen occupations. The need for their services was simply eliminated, and as a result, except for a few lowly jobs, such as janitorial work, or caretaking, there was nothing open to them. Under these conditions, not surprisingly, many of them joined the Jewish police.

Their unfortunate role in the demise of the Warsaw Jewry is a matter of historical record. For the moment, most of them in our "entourage" behaved decently, and I found among our guards quite a few honorable individuals. One of them was to play a crucial role in my survival, but at the moment we were on a train, going in an unknown direction.

In the evening our group arrived at a small station, where a sign told us we were at Konskowola. Our destination was a few miles east of the better known town of Pulawy, on the Vistula river, in the Lublin district.

Surrounded by about thirty Jewish policemen armed with nightsticks, our group proceeded to a brick building in the center of Konskowola, which was to be our home for the next two years. As it turned out, the place was an unfinished movie house, now converted to a labor camp. There was a large area crowded with two-tiered bunks, and several smaller rooms for the administration and the guards.

After soup and bread we retired for the night. In the morning bread and ersatz coffee was distributed for our breakfast, and we were told to assemble outside. A stocky, muscular German Jew introduced himself as the commandant of the Konskowola Labor Camp. <sup>10</sup> Herr Rosenberg announced that our task will be to work for a German company that planned to construct a road going east



<sup>10</sup> A leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Yitzhak Zuckerman, in his memoir Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, U. of Cal. Press, Berkley. Cal. 1993, mentions Rosenberg: "...Benno Rosenberg of the Alliance of Religious Halutzim, who wrote letters in German for us,...showed up (one day) and declared that he wanted to be a supervisor in a camp. Later we heard he was killed...during the liquidation of the camp... we tried, unsuccessfully, to find out what camp it could have been. He went there with pure intentions, to help. (p. 145)



His brief speech, in heavily accented Polish, stressed the need for discipline, and ended on a rather cheerful note: we would be paid for our work! //

Benno Rosenberg, who appeared to be a fair, easy going individual, advised us to get acquainted with the place and dismissed us for the day. I spent the rest of that <sup>day</sup> meeting some of the people and writing a couple of letters to Warsaw.

On the following morning, as various groups, better known as "Arbeits-Kommandos" (work brigades), were being formed, I had a lucky break, with far reaching implications for my future. One of the policemen, whom I knew from my drugstore days, (he was a drug salesman) recognized me, greeted me warmly, and promised to help me. He told me to stay put, while the others were lining up to march out to work. "I will recommend you to the camp physician, to work as his assistant," he assured me.

He kept his promise. After the others departed, Rosenberg came over and ordered me to report to the newly arrived physician, Dr Grzegorz (Gregory) Zwykielski, a young, assimilated Jew from Warsaw, arrived with his attractive, well dressed wife, and moved in into an assigned private home. I walked over, introduced myself, explained the purpose of my visit, and was "hired" on the spot.

Across from his modest residence stood, in the corner of the main town square, a small wooden synagogue, which was now taken over by the labor camp. This was to be our "Revier."<sup>12</sup>

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11. With the Nazi-Soviet pact still in force at the time, nobody knew the purpose of that road, until June 1941, when the finished stretch became clogged with German troops, marching on the Soviet Union.

12. The German word "Revier", which simply means quarter, became well known to countless prisoners, "Haeftlinge" of the Nazi camps. A "Revier" generally denoted any health care facility in a camp. Depending on circumstances, a "Revier", or a variant of it, the "krankenstube" (sickroom), could be a life sustaining facility, but could also mask a place where inhuman medical experiments were performed, and selections for a quick death, either by shooting or gassing were periodically instituted.



As the first order of business, the doctor instructed me to get some help, and set up the infirmary. Where formerly pious Jews came daily to worship, we now got busy placing cots and ~~XXXXX~~ other equipment. When the work was finished, I looked around. The large room, now crowded with cots and a few tables and chairs, was still dominated by the Bimah (the elevated platform for the reading of the Torah), rising in the center. The empty Ark, with its embroidered velvet curtain, and over it the now extinguished Eternal light provided another reminder of the room's recent past. For a moment I turned to that past and could almost see and hear generations of Jews at prayer in this very room, where, by a quirk of fate, I will now live and work. The arrival of doctor Zwykielski, who came to inspect the transformed synagogue, brought me back to the present.

In the succeeding days the doctor spent hours instructing me in the intricacies of giving injections, changing dressings, and related matters. Eventually I became proficient in my tasks, and handled daily groups of individuals, either hurt at work, or suffering from a variety of illnesses. In more serious cases I summoned the doctor to see the patient.

In retrospect I have to say that I was quite good at my responsibilities and felt privileged to be able to help my fellow Jews, rather than contributing to the German war machine. While I did not know it at the time, this training, initiated by doctor Zwykielski, and which I later continued elsewhere, in the long run saved my own life.

The adjoining "mikva" (ritual bath) was quickly adopted for our needs and served as a bath for our patients. I also used it for my own bathing, and occasionally even enjoyed it as a steam bath or sauna.



At my request, Rosenberg assigned a young fellow to assist<sup>56</sup> me in my work. Additionally, two boys became orderlies; their job was to keep the place clean. As to the place itself, it was at first very disturbing for me and my coworkers to work in a building, which, by long tradition was meant to be used for worship only. But soon our misgivings were forgotten; the challenge to provide health services to our fellow Jews became paramount.

Our Jewish guards, new at their duties, and not yet brutalized by their German overseers, were quite decent and accommodating. Their main assignment was to escort the camp inmates to their work sites and bring them back to camp. I was relatively free to move about, often to purchase necessary supplies at the local pharmacy.

The owner of the pharmacy, an elderly Polish woman, often expressed compassion for our people. Both she and the local parish priest, who regularly used to visit the lady pharmacist openly displayed their kindness and sympathy to me. I am sure that this was their way of showing their feelings toward the persecuted and persecutors.

Traditionally, the leading citizens of a small town in those days were the local priest, the teacher and the pharmacist. I was glad to know the two of the trio. The lady owned a large book collection, and she invited me to make use of her library. I accepted her invitation enthusiastically. My free time was now filled with reading Polish classics and translations of foreign literature. Dr. Zwykielski soon joined me in this activity, and the only complaint I sometimes heard from our gracious benefactor was that the good doctor, who apparently read while eating his meals, occasionally stained a page with some sauce, and once she even found a solitary noodle in a book.



My cherished freedom to move about was occasionally disrupted by an encounter with the local German town "Kommandant", a certain Feldfebel Kowalik. He was a mean-spirited soldier, who always carried a whip, and loved to beat up Jews he encountered on the street. It was, of course, mandatory for Jews to wear the Star of David armband. This made them an easy target, even if they did not wear the traditional orthodox garb.

I was equipped with an impressive looking plastic armband, on which a Red Cross was superimposed on the Jewish star. Although I dreaded meeting this Kowalik, who tirelessly roamed the few street of the village, my Red Cross saved me somehow from a beating from that enforcer of German "Ordnung" (Order).

While exploring the village a few days after my arrival I discovered a small Polish grocery, whose owners were friendly and decent. There I was able to get an occasional home cooked meal, and, to my joy, to purchase staples, such as barley, flour, kasha, and legumes. These I promptly began to mail to my parents in Warsaw. Fortunately, at that time the Post Office still delivered mail without discrimination.

Since our camp was under the control of the "Arbeits-Amt" and not of the SS, the German firm that employed us was compelled to pay us minimum wages.<sup>13</sup> These wages helped to pay for my occasional meals at the grocery, and for the products I purchased to mail to my family. I considered myself lucky.

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<sup>13</sup> In the camps run by the SS, the employers paid a set sum per slave laborer directly to the SS.



### Warsaw Visit

Two months after our arrival in Kónskowóka, an announcement came that the whole contingent, with the exception of the staff, was going back to Warsaw. The "Arbeits-Amt" was releasing the captives, and a new group of Jews was to be brought from Warsaw to replace them.

I went with the transport, along with doctor Zwykielski, ostensibly to take care of our medical supplies, but in reality we were longing to see our families and friends. Before my arrest, I watched with fear and apprehension, as workers built brick walls, topped with broken glass, around the Jewish section of the city. Now, on our return, the Ghetto was officially closed.<sup>14</sup>

On arrival, we entered the Ghetto, through a gate, which was guarded by German, Polish, and Jewish police. While the others were heavily armed, the Jewish "Ördnungsdienst" (Order Service) was armed with truncheons only.

As I feared, I ~~XXXXXX~~ found my parents in a desperate mood. My father, always slim, lost even more weight, and my mother, a handsome woman in her better days, was now a shadow of her former self. We discussed the situation, and they agreed with me that my return to the camp was more desirable than staying with them in the hopeless Ghetto. I was, ironically, better off in the labor camp, and, more importantly, I would be able to continue mailing food packages to them.

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<sup>14</sup> The Ghetto closed on ~~October 31~~ November 15, 1940



My brother David eked out a living, working as a furrier, and kept busy with self-help work in the community. I visited my sister Genia (Golda). She struggled to stay afloat, living with her husband Schlomo Livarek, a sewing machine mechanic, and her two little daughters, in a windowless sublet room. The dark, cavelike room, illuminated by a single electric bulb, depressed me greatly.

In the early thirties, Genia, a member of a Labor Zionist group, worked for several months on a farm, where young pioneers were preparing themselves for emigration to the then Palestine. For various reasons, she did not go. Now, looking at her misery, I fervently wished she had gone there, when there was a chance.

My older sister Sarah, an excellent milliner, was able to produce ladies' hats of her own design, which her husband Adam sold to shops. But their modest earnings did not keep up with the galloping prices of essentials. Their son, a little five year boy with a shining face and great promise when I saw him last, changed considerably. I was shocked by the marked deterioration of my nieces and nephew, in that brief period of my absence.

The tragedy of my sister Sarah and her family is directly tied to the immigration policies of the U.S.A. at that time. Adam Dynsztok, my brother-in-law, soon after his marriage to my sister, applied for emigration to the States, where his whole family, <sup>who</sup> adopted the name Dickstein, moved earlier. I remember that in the late thirties Adam and Sarah used to make frequent visits to the U.S. consulate in Warsaw, trying desperately to obtain a speedy visa. Unfortunately for them and many other people, the national quota system, then in force, provided for a very small number of Polish nationals to enter the U.S. Their case dragged



on; the war broke out and they became trapped in the ghetto.

I went to visit David's girlfriend Bella. Her family, of all the people close to me, was best off financially. Because of its importance to textile and paper production, Mr. Gezundhaft's rag sorting business was permitted to function outside the ghetto. This offered many benefits to the family and their friends. Beside Bella and her parents, there was the younger brother Leon and sisters Mania and Rosalie, the latter a beautiful and charming teenager with blond hair and blue eyes. I was warmly welcomed.

From their place I went to visit my sweetheart Bronka, who lived on the next street, ironically named Lucky (Szczesliwa). Bronka (Braindel) lived now with her mother and a younger sister in their old apartment. Her father and an older brother managed to escape to the Soviet Union, and were trying to help their family by sending frequent food packages. Bronka still worked at the Weingart drug store and managed somehow to survive.

Her mother, a simple, goodhearted woman, invited me to partake of their modest supper. After a long absence of her husband and son, she was glad to have a man again at the table. We had a pleasant evening, drinking tea and chatting. Then the time came to say good bye, not knowing when I will see Bronka again.

The next day I explored the streets of the ghetto and was saddened to see obvious deterioration all around me. Gone were the well groomed and well dressed pedestrians. The streets were crowded with shabbily dressed and undernourished masses of people, hustling about. An occasional individual, better dressed, and adequately fed, drew the instant attention of German soldiers, equipped with cameras, eager to snap pictures of the blatant contrasts between wealth and poverty among the "Juden." At that early period in the ghetto, for a price, goods were still relatively easy to obtain. Wealthy individuals



could still obtain good meals in restaurants and decent clothing in stores, but few people had the means necessary. Here lived a half a million people, rich in talent and intelligence, yet so helpless. It was all too depressing.

I felt almost relieved when, a few days later, I joined the transport of our new contingent and returned to Koniskowola. A ragtag band of impoverished young people, undisciplined and hungry, the new inmates differed considerably from the previous group, a largely middle class, better educated crowd. I suspected that a number of them probably served as substitutes for wealthier individuals, who hired them for a price.

Rosenberg, who continued as the commandant of the camp, brought with him as his deputy a former Warsaw accountant, a fellow whose name was Bialostocki. Basically decent, this Bialostocki was shrewd and clever, and knew how to deal with the unruly, rowdy new inmates. With the new transport also came a pleasant young man, Uklejski, who assumed the post of secretary to Rosenberg. (It is now over fifty five years after these events and most of the first names defy my memory.)

At the time my reluctant readiness, or, I should say, semi-voluntary return to the camp seemed merely a good idea. Life of a medic at the labor camp was preferable to the daily misery of the Warsaw Ghetto. The additional advantage of being able to send food packages to my family persuaded me that what I did was prudent and sensible under the circumstances. What I did not know then, however, was that my decision removed me from the doomed ghetto, which, in effect, saved my life. Had I known the coming tragedy, I might have been, perhaps, more reluctant to leave my family.



The "Judenrein" Town of Pulawy

My work in the synagogue-Revier continued and my duties expanded. While my previous constituency consisted of relatively well fed, healthy individuals, the new group, poorer and already weakened by the hardships of Ghetto life, was much more susceptible to various diseases, always lurking about where poverty exists. Unable to cope with some of the more difficult cases, dr. Zwykielski arranged for us to take these patients to the official county physician, a Christian Pole.

Twice, sometimes three times a week I now made a trip to Pulawy, the site of the county administration, where the doctor had his office. Situated on the Vistula river, Pulawy was an old, historic town, and ironically, one of the first in the Generalgouvernement to be cleared of Jews, "Judenrein" in German. As a result, the Pulawy hospital, run by Catholic nuns, was off limits to Jewish patients.

Fortunately, the county doctor, a decent man, following the best traditions of his profession, refused to discriminate against Jewish patients. To him a patient was just that; a person needing help. These visits to the Polish doctor offered additional benefits to our patients; he had better resources, including certain drugs, often unobtainable by us, at his disposal. The frequent visits to the "Judenrein" town became indispensable for the well being of our patients. These visits also facilitated the mailing of food packages by me and others, since the Post office was conveniently located nearby.

Still, our visits to that town were not without pain. One of the streets we had to pass through, invariably reminded us of our situation; the sidewalk was paved with gravestones taken



from the local Jewish cemetery. We were forced to walk on stones with clearly visible Hebrew inscriptions under our feet.

Our trips to Pulawy were mostly uneventful affairs. One day, however, when our convoy, consisting of a sick inmate bedded down on hay on a horse drawn cart, two other patients on foot, a Jewish policeman as an escort, and myself, was nearing our destination, we heard a command, barked in German: "Halt!" Two gendarms on bicycles approached us. "Was haben Sie da?" (What have you there?) they wanted to know. We explained our destination. One of the Germans started to search under the hay, and discovered several packages, prepared for mailing to Warsaw.

The Germans, always suspicious of illegal "activities" by Jews, became agitated: "Schmuggel!" Both proceeded to rip the packages open, but luckily did not find ~~what~~ they were looking for: meat products. Our assortment of grains and legumes did not interest them. We were permitted to continue on our way without further complications. The only problem were the torn packages, which had to be ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ repacked.

On another of our trips, we experienced something completely different. Parallel to the road, but at some distance away, run a railroad track. On that day, first we heard trains in the distance, then a terryfying noise of metal hitting against metal, as if two giants were clashing in the distance. Then there was silence. Later we learned that two trains collided head on. There were many casualties.

Then there was the village fire. The camp inmates were mobilized to go to the burning village to help the volunteer fire fighters. Village fires were notorious in Poland for their propensity to spread. Most peasant huts were of the thatched roof variety, so a single spark was enough to doom a whole



hamlet. The conflagration broke out near Konskowola, and when we arrived, the flames were out of control.

I shall never forget the extraordinary smells that hit our nostrils, for so long deprived of decent food. Pigs, poor things, were roasting in their pigsties, and potatoes were baking in the smoldering barns. What a combination of smells for hungry people to endure! What a fantastic feast it could have been for us! Alas, we were ordered to return to our camp empty handed, while the stricken peasants kept bewailing their misfortune,

### The Typhus epidemic

The unhealthy, cramped conditions in the camp inevitably resulted in lice infestation. This eventually led to an outbreak of typhus, better known as spotted fever, "Fleckfieber" in German. This was my first encounter with this dangerous disease. Luckily, as it turned out, most of our inmates, Polish Jews, were quite resistant to the disease, and had a good chance of recovery. There were some side effects like hair loss, or occasional hearing impairment, but ~~wasxxxxxxx~~ that was rather rare.

We coped with our new, difficult problem, as best as we could. There were some drugs available at that time to fight the outbreak, but the chance of getting hold of them were remote. The disease, sometimes also called epidemic typhus, lasted about two weeks and was typically characterized by high fever, which would reach its climax on the sixth day, and a reddish skin eruption-the spots.

With the fever gone, the patient was weak and exhausted. There was an urgent need to provide decent nourishment and rehabilitation for these patients, which our Revier was unable to supply. As a result of a discussion between dr. Zwykielski



and Rosenberg I was chosen to go to Pulawy on a mission. I went to the county administration to try to obtain extra rations for our patients. I was directed to speak to a young Polish woman in charge of food allotments. I explained to her the nature of our problem. She quickly turned to a subordinate: "Please, provide this young man with the necessary coupons." I could not believe my ears, when, in answer to an inquiry by the subordinate as to what she should give us, that admirable young Pole answered: "'wszystko, wszystko!" (Everything, everything!). "Flour, sugar, farina, zwieback, etc."

Remembering how difficult it was for Jews to deal with the Polish beaurocracy even before the war, I was elated by the results of my efforts. Thinking back to that episode, I often wish I had the name of that decent woman, to honor her deed.

Our fortunate convalescents, provided with a decent diet, recovered in due time, mostly without complications.

The night my first patient died, I took it hard. It was an elderly man, who, weakened by pneumonia, was unable to reverse the inevitable. I watched with ~~an~~ apprehension as his breathing cycle took longer and longer, and then stopped. Death seems to favor night time, so I was forced by the German-~~decreed~~ curfew to stay with the body for the rest of the night, a new, wrenching experience for me.

### An Illegal Trip

Time was passing; it was springtime of the year 1941. I kept worrying a lot about my family and friends in Warsaw. I made up my mind to undertake a clandestine trip to Warsaw. I worked out a plan which I shared with my friend Uklejski, on whose help I could count. In retrospect, I must admit that the idea was a bit reckless; according to some sources, 17 Jews were executed on February 12, 1941, simply for being outside the ghetto in Warsaw. But in those days many people took such risks. My friend prepared for me an official looking



ment, which, over the impressive flourish of the camp commandant's signature, ordered me to proceed to Warsaw to secure medical supplies. Since it was forbidden at that time for Jews to travel without an escort, I was determined to do it illegally.

Since I needed some extra money for the trip, I obtained a loan from the lady pharmacist, who was very supportive of my plan. For the moment I did not worry too much about my return, when I would have to explain to the camp authorities the reasons for my absence. I talked to my boss, dr. Zwykielski, and he was quite willing to let me go for a few days.

I packed a few necessities in my shoulder bag and walked over to the railroad station. Just before I reached it, I removed my fancy armband and hid it away in my pocket. I purchased a ticket to Warsaw and resolutely boarded <sup>a train</sup> to my destination. It was a simple act, but fraught with danger for a Jew in Nazi occupied Poland. Less than a year later, this would be a "crime" punishable by death. Luckily, my appearance was not "bad", that is I did not look very Jewish. There was one problem that worried me a little: what if the guards at the Ghetto question me about my lack of an official escort? It is too late to worry about it, I decided.

I arrived in Warsaw without a hitch. Hoping for the best I approached the nearest Ghetto gate, very tense, but determined. Just before reaching the gate, I retrieved my armband with the Red cross-star of David boldly displayed, and slid it over my *right* arm, making sure nobody saw me doing it. I was stopped by three guards- a German gendarme, a Polish policeman, and a Jewish policeman. I produced my document, they all read it, did not ask any questions- after all I was entering the Ghetto, not leaving it, - and let me pass through. It occurred to me that leaving these walls will be much more difficult, but I did not want to ~~worry~~ <sup>think</sup> about it.



at the moment. The expectation of seeing my family and friends was foremost on my mind.

I walked on and soon found myself on Nalewki street, my home turf. Or was it? I could have been a tourist on a visit to a foreign city, except that I did not feel like a tourist. Crowds, dirt and noise assaulted my senses immediately. The scene was more reminiscent of a colonial town than anything else. There were the ubiquitous beggars in dreadful tatters. Rikshas, the three wheeled vehicles, moved about, transporting to somewhere ~~X~~ the colonial masters, this time Germans, or some Jewish policemen, or even occasionally well-to-do (still) civilians. Later I saw also electric trolleys, of which there were two kinds: The Jewish ones with a star of David on top, were for the use of the "natives" only, while the "Aryan" ones, the only link left between various sections of the torn apart city, were just passing through the Ghetto at full speed, without stopping. Jews were excluded from using them, so there was no need to ~~stop~~ stop. Completing that oriental scene were pedlars, young and old, who were trying hard to call attention to their wares.

My parents and David were surprised and happy to see me. My parents aged considerably, but otherwise were in decent shape, partly, as they told me, because of my food packages. My father, always the quiet, reticent man, still attended his "stibl" (a makeshift synagogue, literally a little room) three times daily, to pray, and perhaps to find some solace. He steadfastly refused to compromise on his insistence that his sparse meals be Kosher.

I went to see my two sisters. My older sister Sarah was still producing ladies hats, but the shortage of supplies, and the constantly shrinking demand for such luxuries as hats made it extremely hard to eke out a living. My little nephew was ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~



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listless and pale. My attempts at cheering him up were hopeless.

My younger sister Golda was even worse off, in her windowless room, where two little girls were growing up in the most pitiful conditions. I felt sorry for my two brothers-in-law, who tried their best to help their families under circumstances not of their making. But my biggest heartache was caused by the knowledge that the little ones suffered so much, and so little could be done for them.

Bronka Zegrze, my girlfriend, still lived at 7 Szczesliwa st. and when I unexpectedly appeared there, I was immediately invited to join her, her mother and sister, in a modest meal of potato soup and bread. We spent ~~the~~ evening together, trying to forget the misery which surrounded us.

Because of the curfew, I was forced to stay over. After a quick breakfast ~~next day~~ I was ready to depart, ~~but~~ found the gate of the building locked and guarded by a Jewish policeman. Apparently, a case of typhus was discovered in one of the apartments, and as a result, all tenants were to be ~~quarantined~~ quarantined. In addition, I found out, all bedlinen of the tenants was to be surrendered for ~~steaming~~ steaming in a delousing station.

It is impossible to describe the bedlam that broke out, when the tenants of the buiding discovered what has happened. Although it was still early in the morning, people were running back and forth in utter confusion. Their panic was well founded. From other peoples' experience they knew what kind of treatment their very precious, under existing conditions almost irreplaceable possessions- the bed linen, will get. They knew that some undoubtedly will be lost, while the bulk will be returned torn, dirty, with a foul smell clinging to the discolored linen. The fragile



feather quilts and pillows, generally in use in Poland, could not withstand the brutal steam treatment and rough handling, without serious damage.

Some of the distraught tenants tried openly to bribe the policemen and sanitary personnel. Others tried a different tack; they argued that their places are clean and free of vermin. While I was observing this pathetic scene, Bronka tried to plead my special case; after all, I did not live in the building. When the hesitant policeman resisted, she slipped him a few zlotys, and I was released. I was both glad to be out and sorry for Bronka and her family, who faced an unpleasant ordeal. An incident which I witnessed a short time later, made me quickly forget what transpired earlier.

On my way home I found myself on Mila (Pleasant) street, which two short years later was destined to be the scene of fierce fighting in <sup>the</sup> Ghetto Uprising.<sup>15</sup> Before the war this street was known for its fishmongers and greengrocers. Pungent smells always permeated the store fronts and sidewalks. There were continually large throngs of working class housewives doing their purchases of herring, pickles and vegetables; potatoes, cabbages and red beets were the most common staples. On fridays live carp and other fish, traditionally used for the obligatory gefilte fish at the Sabbath meal, were displayed in large, water filled tanks. With a shudder I recalled my mother, many a friday cutting up one of these unlucky creatures, and removing its heart, which, to my dismay, kept beating for quite a while.

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<sup>15</sup> The command post of the Uprising was located at #18 Mila street



Now, on this spring day of 1941, the smells were still there, even though the stores were nearly empty, and, ironically, the crowds larger. The sidewalks were coated with the accumulated grime, which, through the years only occasionally was washed down by a merciful rain. As I was walking, and observing the scene, I noticed a middle aged woman walking briskly and clutching in her hands a potful of food, probably obtained at a nearby soup kitchen. Suddenly the woman tripped on the slippery sidewalk, and the content of the pot went flying to the ground. The poor woman broke out in sobs-she just lost a meal for her family. Almost immediately, a man dressed in rags, darted out from the sympathetic crowd, fell on his knees, and, to ~~my horror~~ <sup>my horror</sup> ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~, started to scoop up the spilled food with his hands, and eat it in great, hasty gulps. Unlike me, a visitor, the crowd watching the poor man eating, reacted mostly with indifference, understanding, and maybe even some envy. I quickly left the scene, deeply disturbed.

During my, mercifully brief, stay in Warsaw I was warned to be careful when carrying a parcel of any sort. Hungry youngsters were snatching packages from passersby, hoping that these parcels contain food. If they found bread, they would bite into it, effectively forcing the owner to give it up. Such was the desperation of the young. I myself observed one or two cases of parcel snatching, amid much shouting and cursing. In that early stage of the Ghetto's existence, the children and elderly were hardest hit by the deliberate Nazi policy of starving the Jewish population.<sup>16</sup>

The fortunate few who still had money, were able to supplement the official rations with food purchased on the black market. Smuggling of food became a way of life in Warsaw in general, and in the Ghetto in particular. I heard many tales of ingenuity



16 In his book Courage Under Siege, Starvation, Disease and Death in the Warsaw Ghetto, Oxford U. Press, N.Y. 1992, the Canadian medical historian, Dr. Charles G. Roland, reports that "by 1941 the official ration provided...184 calories for Jews in the ghetto" (p. 102)



some probably exaggerated, of the smugglers, who brought in food into the Ghetto. I heard of milk transported to the Ghetto by the water pipes-this sounded improbable to me-, of meat smuggled in hearses, on their return from the cemetery, which was outside the walls, I even heard of live cows being brought in, either clandestinely, or by bribery. A hungry population fought back in any way possible.

On my second day in Warsaw I happened to walk on Zamenhof street, named after the Jewish oculist and inventor of the international language Esperanto, who lived on that street, at no. 9, when the street was known as Dzika (Wild)street. As I mentioned already, the "Aryan" trolleys were still passing through the Ghetto streets at that time. As one of those trolleys, packed with gentiles was passing the street at full speed, I saw somebody toss from the trolley a large bag of grain, which split open ~~when~~, when it hit the hard surface of the road. It spilled out the golden, precious seeds on the road. A group of people appeared as if on cue; they scooped up the grain into a variety of receptacles, and just as quickly as they ~~appeared~~ came, they vanished into the side streets.

I learned from talks with relatives and friends that small, hand turned coffee grinders became very important in the Ghetto. Instead of the unobtainable coffee, however, they were now used to grind grain into flour. The tedious and slow process resulted in modest amounts of flour, but, having few alternatives, people were quite happy with this ingenious use of an oldfashioned implement.

The occupiers were relentless in their oppressive measures. At the time of my "visit" two harsh decrees, affecting also non-Jews, were enforced by the German authorities. One concerned



fur coats. All furs, both ladies' and men's, were to be delivered to ~~to~~ them forthwith. Even here Jews were treated more harshly. They were subject to immediate execution, if found concealing furs. Many individuals, in an act of defiance, destroyed or hid their furs, rather than surrender them to the enemy, who apparently was preparing for war in the East.

The other measure indicated an acute shortage of metals in the Third Reich. Practically all monuments, public park fences, even door knobs in some cases, were ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ dismantled, broken up and collected by German squads, presumably to be melted down. (When I visited Warsaw in 1983, the beautiful Saxon Gardens still had no fences) The well known Warsaw monuments erected to honor such Polish personalities as Copernicus, Chopin, and Poniatowski, fell victims to Nazi barbarism.

My days in the Ghetto were coming to a close. I saw all my relatives and friends, absorbed many of the Ghetto's woes, and now it was time to move on. It was urgent that I return to Konskowola. But first I had to devise a way to get out of the walled quarters. Here Bella's father provided the answer. As I indicated previously, his recycling warehouse was located outside the walls of the Ghetto. He was permitted to bring in daily a group of Jewish workers, under escort of Polish police. I discussed my problem with Mr. Gezundhajt, and <sup>he</sup> readily agreed to "hire" me for a day.

On the appointed day I took leave of my family and friends, expressing the fervent hope to see them again soon, under better circumstances. I never contemplated to stay in Warsaw, particularly after I saw the harsh condition there, and my family fully supported my return. It may well be



that they subconsciously wanted me out of the doomed Ghetto. I will never know, because I never saw my good parents again.

### Risky Return

Near one of the gates I met a Polish policeman, who escorted me to the Gezundhajt warehouse. The policeman left, while I had a brief chat with Bella's father, who urged me to be careful. I thanked him for his help, removed my armband and walked out into the "Aryan" world.

Earlier I received from Bronka the address of a cosmetics store owned by my former coworker, Czeslaw Drabowicz. I decided to go see him, before my departure. His nicely appointed store on the principal street of Warsaw, Marszalkowska, was crowded when I entered. Czeslaw winced when he saw me. "Isak, what are you doing here?" he whispered. I explained that I was on a short visit to Warsaw, and came to say hello to him.

My quite normal explanation might have been sufficient in normal times. But these were not normal times. He became visibly agitated. Did he think that I came to him for help? When the customers left, he packed for me a nice parcel of toiletries, soap, shaving cream, etc.; items which were difficult to obtain otherwise. and handed that to me, as a ~~parting~~ gift. We shook hands, he wished me good luck, and we parted. He was relieved to see me go; he obviously did not want to get involved with somebody who might endanger his relatively secure existence. That was my last encounter with Czeslaw. (In 1983, on my visit to Poland, I met his widow, who told me that he died a year earlier, in 1982, after an illness. Apparently they suffered great hardships during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.)



The most difficult part of my risky trip was still

At the railroad station I bought my ticket and soon boarded the train. The compartments were full of Poles, loaded down with every conceivable type of luggage. Most of them were obviously engaged in barter with Polish peasants, later to return to the city loaded down with food parcels. Food was under the strictest control of the Germans, and as a result smuggling became a way of life for many, and a necessity for most people. It was said that illiterate peasants were now acquiring pianos and other luxury items in exchange for ham and bacon.

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The train started to move and I found a place to sit. I put my parcel on the shelf above me and took a short nap. I was awakened by a sudden commotion on the train. We were standing at some station. I went over to a window and looked out. What I saw distressed me greatly, although I tried not to show it. Blue coated German gendarms were outside, collecting parcels, while their comrades were moving through the train, tossing unceremoniously these parcels out through open windows, not even bothering to inquire from their owners about their content. I was in trouble.

Were they to ask me for documents, I would be in great danger. I dived into the nearest available toilet and stood there, with my heart pounding, and hoping that the danger would just go away. Luck was with me. The train began to move before the Germans got to our compartment. The Germans, cursing loudly, jumped off, and everybody relaxed. Somebody, by way of explanation, remarked that the train engineer was probably bribed to move on. The rest of my trip passed uneventfully.

Once back in Konskowola, I retrieved my invaluable plastic



armband and slipped it on. I was again legitimate. In the Revier they were relieved to see me back; the typhus epidemic was still raging and they needed my help. I plunged back into my work.

### Ill With Typhus

Then, suddenly, the inevitable happened; I fell ill with high fever. Dr. Zwykielski was summoned and he quickly diagnosed typhus. The doctor was concerned. He got in touch with the county physician, who, disregarding the German orders, did the unexpected; he ~~XXXXXX~~ admitted me to the county hospital, located in the "aryanized" town of Pulawy.

I came under ~~XXXXXXXX~~ excellent care of Catholic nuns. The hospital ward I found myself in was immaculately clean. On the gleaming, whitewashed wall hung a wooden crucifix, a new experience for me. I was weak and exhausted. My appetite was gone and I ate very little. I was washed and my bed cleaned every day. The nuns-nurses were very gentle with me. In my semiconscious state I mused about the decency and patience of these good women. I was impressed by their devotion to their patients' well being.

After a few days in the ward I began to hallucinate; my temperature reached close to 107°F. (42°C.) Across the street from the hospital there was a German military hospital. Looking out the window near my bed, I could see military ambulances coming and going. In my fevered mind I imagined that the Germans are leaving for good- wishfull thinking- and I was very happy. The good sisters were much puzzled by my expression of joy, but knowing that I was hallucinating, they did not pay much attention to my bubbling about the hated Germans finally leaving us alone.

After six days of high fever I reached the critical stage and my temperature all of a sudden fell to below normal. I felt



drained of all strength. The doctor came over to my bed, and said, with a smile: "You are very fortunate to come out of that dangerous fever. You are now immune to typhus."

After a few days of recovery, I was , unfortunately, send back to Koniskowola. I knew from other patients, who experienced the illness, that the convalescence is one long period of overwhelming appetite, at a time when food was so scarce. Now I faced the same problem myself. What I needed was a feast every day; what I got was a miserable camp ration. The generous flow of supplementary food from the county was terminated earlier, and I was forced to scrounge around, in my weakened state, to satisfy my craving for nourishment. Somehow, I eventually recovered, and returned to my duties.

While my physical condition improved, the overall conditions for Jews deteriorated considerably. To my despair, mail was declared "verboden" for Jews. I was suddenly unable to send food to my starving family. Travel by Jews was declared to be a capital ~~XXXXXX~~ offense, punishable by death. The noose was tightening around us, but we continued to hope that somehow things will get better. How else could one continue?

Unexpectedly, in May of that year, several hundred new inmates were brought to Koniskowola from a camp in Biala Podlaska. They were former soldiers of the Polish army, now POW's, who resided before the war in eastern part of Poland, presently occupied by the Soviet Union. As I indicated earlier, such Jewish POW's were not permitted to go home. Their main camp was located on Lipowa street, in Lublin, from which several groups were dispersed to various camp sites earlier.

Our newcomers, mostly strong, proud people, still wore the Polish army uniforms. With their disciplined presence, conditions in the camp changed considerably. The civilians in the camp became



less unruly, taking their cue from the POW's.

Another medic, from the ranks of the "Litvaks" (as the Jews of eastern Poland were called), was assigned to work with me. Chaskiel Chaikin was a handsome , friendly and energetic fellow, who exuded confidence and good will. Eventually we developed into a well coordinated , efficient team.

The presence of the "Jency" (plural for jeniec, prisoner of war in Polish), inspired me to a bold step, which later proved to be of the utmost importance in my struggle for survival. I decided to rejoin the POW's, sensing that I have a better chance by being with them. I told some key people among them of my previous status as a POW, and they expressed no reservations to my plan.

Next I procured from the camp tailor shop a quite decent looking Polish military outfit. High boots completed the change. From now on I was considered a "jeniec" (pronounced yenietz), without realizing how wise a move that soon proved to be.

### Unusual Suicide

Strange as it may seem, I encountered very few cases of mental disorder in the years of my incarceration and work as a medic. Without claiming to possess scientific expertise in this matter, I can only speculate that, despite the most stressful conditions in the camps, the inmates , forced to mobilize all their resources for sheer physical survival, were able to fight off any potential threat of a mental breakdown, as endangering that survival. (For related reasons, most women in the camps did not menstruate).

One case in which I became involved, occurred at Konskowola. The case was bizarre and the ending tragic.

One of the POW's, a young man, was suffering from extreme depression. We kept him in the Revier and tried to take care of him



as best we could. His behavior was strange. When given a broom, for example, he would sweep all day, unless we took the broom away from him.

One day he was observed putting a needle in his mouth. Before one of us was able to retrieve it, he managed to swallow the sharp object. We notified the doctor, who warned us that the patient reached the suicidal stage: "We must try to prevent it. Keep an eye on him at all times."

We tried our best, but one morning he managed to elude us. He disappeared ~~XXXX~~ from sight. The whole camp was alerted and people spread out to search for him. He was soon located. Someone with a sharp eye saw feet sticking up from the muck of the latrine. It must have been a horrible sight. I was lucky not to be present at the scene, and was spared the awful job of cleaning up the poor fellow. On doctor's orders I quickly prepared a syringe equipped with a long needle, filled it with adrenalin, and handed it to dr. Zwykielski. He immediately injected it directly into the victims heart. But it was too late. All our measures, including massaging of his chest, failed to revive him. We were all in shock. What a way to die! (I had an acute sense of deja vu, when, many years later I saw a similar scene enacted in the Italian film "Seven Beauties")

### The Invasion of the Soviet Union

In June of 1941 the road which passed through Konskowola, and on which our camp inmates toiled for so long, became suddenly clogged with German troops. Tanks, trucks loaded with troops, soldiers on motorcycles, some even on bicycles, moved in great numbers. Once, I vividly recall, large trucks, loaded with monstrous bombs, stopped in town for a brief break. The Germans, oblivious



or may be contemptuous of the crowd of onlookers, relieved themselves on the spot.

The period soon after the June 22nd invasion of the Soviet Union <sup>US</sup> filled with great anxiety. The expectations of a quick defeat of the Nazis at the hands of the Red army faded fast as, to our dismay, the Germans succeeded on all fronts, even getting perilously close to Moscow.

I was worried about the fate of my two brothers, who lived on the other side of the border. I did not know at the time that closely behind the regular troops, a murderous band of SS, known as the "Einsatzgruppen" (Special Forces) was given the task of exterminating Jews and communists. I never succeeded in finding out about the fate of my brothers, Julian with his family, and my youngest sibling, Joseph, -Yosele- as we affectionally called him. I must assume, sadly, that they fell victims to those "Einsatzgruppen."

### Deportations

Early one morning, in the fall of 1941, I was awakened by a strange noise coming from the main town square. The synagogue in which we had our Revier, was only a short block away from the square, and the view of it was unobstructed. I cautiously peered out through the window, and what I saw literally froze the blood in my veins. The Jewish population of the town stood assembled there, clutching suitcases and bundles. From the distance I recognized the town rabbi in their midst. Men, women and children stood, surrounded by Germans armed with automatic weapons. A Torah scroll lay, unrolled across the square, and a few Nazi <sup>barbarians</sup> were trampling on it with relish.



From the distance I could hear the Germans yelling and screaming threats and obscenities at the assembled, mute with fear victims. As I watched through the window, shaking with helpless rage mixed with fear, the people were quickly removed from the square.<sup>17</sup>

I witnessed a deportation, which Jews everywhere feared, but which I was spared to see until then. The village, now eerily empty, was quiet for a few days. Then suddenly a resurrection occurred. A transport of several hundred Slovak Jews was brought to town. These people, who came from a more affluent, advanced environment, had a terrible time adjusting to the more primitive ancient quarters of the previous tenants.

There was no work, and no possibility to earn a living. Not surprisingly, many of the newcomers succumbed very quickly to hunger and diseases. I had an opportunity to meet one of these strangers. He was a husky, athletically built individual, a travelling salesman in his native country. He spoke to me in Slovak, a Slavic language similar to Polish, and sometimes in German. The last time I met him, he shrunk to a fraction of his former bulk. A few days later he was dead.

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<sup>17</sup> After these lines were written, I found a heartbreaking account of the Kónskowola tragedy. There is a discrepancy in dates, but I attribute this to the general confusion of the period. According to the martyred Jewish historian, Emanuel Ringelblum, "At Kónskowola... the Germans had taken the Jews to the bank of the Vistula and then ordered the rabbi: "Be Moses! Divide the waters of the Vistula!" The Jews were then forced, with their rabbi at their head, into the water. Then, amid a barrage of shooting, all were shot, or drowned." (Quoted in Martin Gilbert's "The Holocaust" Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, New York 1986, page 352)



The shifting of population, of the kind I witnessed at Konskowola, was clearly a deliberate Nazi policy. In their drive to do away with the Jews, the Germans saw many advantages in that method. It weakened the people's will to resist, it confused the newcomers, it made communication with the local population difficult. It inevitably, <sup>brought</sup> in its wake, hunger, disease, and often death, even without Nazi violence. The stubborn survivors of such ordeals were dealt with at a later, more convenient, <sup>time</sup> by deportations to death camps.

### Sadlowice Branch

Among the POW's at Konskowola there was one individual who stood out, both physically, and by the force of his personality. <sup>Noah</sup> Sztokman was a tall, handsome "jeniec" of pleasant manners and an appealing way of dealing with people. There were rumors that he was an officer in the Polish army, but I had doubts about it; there were not many officers in the former Polish army who were of Jewish origin. Those who were, were mostly professionals, doctors, engineers, or lawyers. The rumor was probably a result of his appearance and proud bearing. Somehow I never had a chance to ask him about it. I struck up a friendship with him, and when, one day, he was ordered to form a group of POW's, and organize a branch of our camp at Sadlowice, across the Vistula river, I was asked to join him; I was glad I did.

Sadlowice was the site of the prewar State Agricultural Institute (Panstwowy Instytut Naukowy Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego), well known in Poland by its initials: P.I.N.G.W. One of the very few prewar research institutions devoted to agriculture, in a country subsisting largely on agriculture, the institute occupied a large area near the "Judenrein" town of Pulawy, mentioned previously, on the left bank of the principal river in Poland, the Vistula.



The institute was closed, but the Germans apparently needed slave labor to help in their exploitation of the institute's resources, mainly ~~three~~ nurseries. Sztokman wanted me to run the Revier at the new branch.

This turned out to be my most tranquil year of the war. From October 1941 to October 1942 I was relatively free to roam the outer fringes of the large estate. It was, by no means, complete bliss-I was often hungry and under great stress-but at least I was not restricted in my movements within the confines of the institute.

In the spring and summer the largely undisturbed land near the shore was particularly lovely. I never learned to swim, but I was able to wade in the shallow waters of the river near the shore. There I discovered peaceful little islands, covered with reeds and wild vegetation. The only inhabitants of these small enclaves of tranquility were water birds. One time I even discovered a wild goose nest, when the terrified mother goose rose up in a panicky flight, almost in front of my nose. My unexpected reward was a half a dozen goose eggs, a rarity in our meager camp fare. I delivered the eggs to our two cooks, Tauber and Miedziuk, who cooked up a large omelet for us to share.

But this lucky break did not happen often. Most of the time I was undernourished and hungry. Occasionally my sparse diet was supplemented by a precious bottle of milk, or some fresh fruit, which I received in exchange for medical attention paid to a young gentile woman. She was the daughter of the Polish superintendent of the estate. Although married to a mechanic employed by the institute, Maria was rumored to have a liaison with our Sztokman. I tended to believe the rumor, knowing that her marriage was not an especially happy one. Childless, she was often alone, and probably very



lonely. Besides, Sztokman was a rather handsome fellow.

In any case, I liked her, even if she deceived her husband, an ordinary guy, who quite obviously neglected her. At least once a week Maria would appear in my tiny room, which served also as the infirmary, under the pretext of needing a band-aid or an head-ache pill. Soon we would engage in some banter, I to forget my "tsuris" (problems), she to relieve her loneliness. A decent soul, she never forgot to bring me some nourishing morsel.

I had otherwise little to do, with only about 50 inmates as my constituency. In good weather I soaked in the outdoors, in bad weather I read books.

But to get books was not a simple matter. I had to make frequent trips to Konskowola, where I could borrow books at my friends' pharmacy, while pretending to go there for my medical needs, which were really minimal. My problem was to persuade the "balagula", (the driver) of a horse drawn cart, which frequently transported saplings to Konskowola, to take me along. This fellow-POW, whose last name was Goldberg, was a semi-literate individual from a small Whiterussian village. Of medium height, but quite strong, he was highly unsympathetic to book readers like myself. His favorite epithet, often employed in my direction, was: "Shitty intelligent-zia", which summed up his views on such matters. Several times he tried to prevent me from climbing up to the top of the pile of saplings on his cart. Once or twice he ~~XXXXXXXX~~ succeeded, but I did not give up easily, occasionally complaining to Sztokman about the unfriendly teamster. Mostly I succeeded in hitching a ride.

This unpleasant individual had a very unusual biological peculiarity: his heart and other organs were reversed. As a result his heart was on the wrong side of the chest. Who knows? Maybe this accounted for his unfriendly disposition. This anomaly was



uncovered later, in another place and in due time I shall return to it.

Several daring camp inmates, taking advantage of the relative freedom of movement at Sadlowice, made it a habit, on Sundayafternoons , to make forays into the neighboring villages, in search of food. The most successful team, highly skilled in the "art" of "organizing" food, as it was known in Polish, was my teamster Goldberg and his partner, Avnet, of an even more disagreeable disposition.

Their technique was simple: on entering a peasant's hut, they would point at their Polish army uniforms, and inform the patriotic Poles that they are returning home from POW camps and need some food. Naturally, they did not identify themselves as Jews. The peasants usually obliged, feeling compassion for the hungry returnees. Late at night these entrepreneurs would return to camp loaded with bags full of bread and other foodstuff.

While I was often hungry at Sadlowice, my more pressing need was to talk to some friendly soul, to find solace among decent people. In the vicinity of Sadlowice I discovered a friendly person whose name eludes my memory, a Jewish dentist who practiced his art in the shtetl of Janowiec. In his home I found a friendly atmosphere, intelligent talk, and an occasional good meal too.

My host, true to his professional calling, soon discovered that I have some front teeth missing. He offered to replace them with a metal bridge, at no charge. Naturally, I was very grateful and accepted his generous offer without hesitation.

The story of my missing teeth was, in some strange way, closely tied to my war experiences. While still a young boy, I fell once on the street, while playing with friends, and broke off a half



of my front upper incisor. My parents could not afford expensive dental care for me. This led to further deterioration of my teeth.

Later my oldest brother Julian chose the profession of a dental technician and for a while I even worked in his lab, preparing plaster casts and polishing gold crowns. At the beginning of 1939 my brother offered to fix my teeth. His dentist did preliminary work; my brother took the necessary measurements and the gold bridge began to take shape. Just then I was drafted into the army - teeth or no teeth. My brother was forced to stop further work on my badly needed bridge. He promised to finish work, when I return home.

Now, thanks to the decency and friendships of the Janowiec dentist, I was finally on my way to fill in the unsightly gap in my front teeth. I was very touched by the decent gesture of that dentist, who, after all, was a total stranger to me only a few weeks earlier.

But, alas, it was not fated to happen this time either. After a few visits on successive Sundays, my friend announced that by next Sunday my bridge would be ready for permanent mounting. On the appointed day I was nearing Janowiec, full of pleasant anticipation, when I noticed disturbing changes. The village was strangely quiet. Few people were on the street, none of them Jewish looking. Soon I discovered the awful truth: all Jews of Janowiec were deported to an "unknown" destination a few days earlier. My kindly dentist was gone, and with him my bridge. Recalling what happened to the Jews of Konskowola earlier, I quickly forgot about my teeth. I mourned my dentist and the people of Janowiec, and wondered in despair; who is going to be next? I returned to the camp deeply depressed.



Apparently the deportation of Jews from the area's many small towns accelerated at that time, because suddenly a group of about fifty young girls was brought to Sadlowice from a nearby town of Zwolen. They told us tearfully that the Germans deported their families to an unknown destination.

These young girls, until now sheltered by their families, found themselves all at once torn from their homes and thrown into an unfamiliar world of a labor camp. (After the war, I met in Germany one of these girls, now a young, attractive woman, who managed to survive several camps. She did not know if others of her Zwolen group survived the war.)

Some of their families were hiding out in the adjoining woods, and the first few nights after these girls were brought to our place, we witnessed heart-breaking scenes when some of the desperate parents sneaked into the camp to see their daughters. After a while these nighttime visits gradually ceased, as these unfortunate people were picked up by the Germans, or, hopefully, some of them found safer shelter elsewhere.

Meanwhile the Germans continued to make advances in the Soviet Union, and paralleling that, they accelerated their war against the Jews. Knowing that the area around us was rapidly becoming "Judenrein", we braced ourselves for an ending of the relatively benevolent chapter of the Sadlowice camp. That end came on October 28, 1942.

#### Forced Labor Camp Budzyn- a Branch of Majdanek

On that gray, overcast morning we received orders to prepare for departure. The Zwolen girls, who were told to remain in place, tearfully said good-bye to the men. A number of them struck up



close friendships with some of our POW's, and now they were being left alone again. But these were cruel times; there was no time to feel sorry for anybody.

In the early afternoon, back at the main camp, there was a brief moment of excitement, as friends embraced each other, glad to be together again. But, when everybody retired for the night, there was not much sleeping. A foreboding of things to come was not very conducive to sleep.

Early next morning, trucks, some with heavily armed SS-men and Ukrainian auxiliaries, arrived in town. People were in a state of near panic. First the Slovak Jews were ordered to assemble in the main town square, then all civilians of our camp were told to join them. A short while later the trucks departed with their human cargo. I was left behind with the POW's; my uniform was effective.<sup>18</sup>

From my previous experience I knew that, faced with a choice, the Germans treated better a group that appeared more disciplined and in better physical shape, in our case, the POW's. The fact that they did separate the civilians from the rest and sent them away, should have given us a clue as to their possible fate. But we really did not know.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Until liberation, few individuals in the camps, other than the death camps, knew about the "Final Solution," the German euphemism for their plan to exterminate all Jews. They were very successful in keeping their crimes secret. There was no way to know the destination of any transport of Jews being deported.

<sup>19</sup> According to Simon Wiesenthal's book: "Every Day a Remembrance Day" (1986, page 110), 3500 Jews from the ghetto of Koniskowola were deported to the Sobibor extermination camp on May 8, 1942. As in the previous citation about Koniskowola (see p. 80), the date is wrong.

The most accurate information about the fate of the Koniskowola deportees is given in Charles Browning's book "Ordinary Men". According to Browning (p. 86), the 101 police battalion killed 1100 Jews in Koniskowola, including the Jewish Council head, probably Benno Rosenberg, at the end of October 1942.



My self-congratulatory mood, if one could call it so, given the circumstances of the moment, was cut short. Another convoy of military trucks arrived later the same fateful day. This time it was ~~our own~~ group that was ordered to board the trucks. Squeezed tightly, we departed, under guard of black and green uniformed Ukrainians.

The forced labor camp Budzyn.

Several hours later, utterly exhausted from standing and trying to keep our balance on the fast moving vehicles, our group arrived at a formidable looking camp in the woods. This was a scary new experience for all of us. There was a high, barbed wire fence all around the place, and watchtowers, erected on the four corners, looked like some giant beasts, ready to devour us. Our "holiday" was over.

The inmates were already back from work, when we arrived. I approached some of the people, who gathered around us, and inquired about the place. It was called Budzyn and functioned as a branch of the notorious Majdanek camp near Lublin, my place of birth. Shortly before the war, the Polish government began constructing an airplane factory nearby, complete with modern housing for the employees. This factory was now run by the German aircraft manufacturer, Heinkelwerke. The camp provided the slave labor for them. SS Oberscharfuehrer Handtke was in charge of the camp.

At that stage, the bulk of the two-three thousand inmates consisted of Jews from the immediate vicinity; from the towns of Krasnik, Zakrzowek, and smaller communities nearby. There were men, women, and even some children, many still retaining family bonds. In addition, there were some POW's, and a group of ~~XXXXXX~~ Viennese Jews, brought here from Majdanek.

That night, after a meal of watery kohlrabi soup, we slept on



four-tiered bunks, equipped with the ubiquitous "Strohsacks" and blankets of dubious cleanliness. Still, our mood had somewhat improved. We knew at least that for the time being we are safe. The prospects of working in a factory did not unduly disturb us. Most of the POW's have had that experience already, while in Germany.

The next morning we were awakened by whistles and screams in the three operative languages: German, Polish and Yiddish; "Get up!" A few men were ordered to proceed to the kitchen, while the rest of us run to the latrine and adjoining washroom, where several sinks with cold water taps were available for a quick washup and a hurried shave, which I somehow managed, using my old, faithful safety blade.

Hot 'ersatz" (substitute) coffee was dispensed along with a slice of bread. After this starvation breakfast was consumed an order came to line up in a large area in the center of the camp, the so called "Appel Platz"-roll-call square.

This was my first taste of the infamous Nazi routine in all the camps across occupied Europe- the roll call- a procedure where the prisoners were counted daily. Still remembering our military drills, most of us formed orderly rows without difficulty. There was however, a new group of civilians, who apparently arrived after us, and they created a bit of chaos. The arrival of Ukrainian guard caused the last strugglers to slip into the ranks without delay.

A young SS-man, armed with a submachine gun, appeared and posted himself in front of us. Since I was in the first row, I was positioned almost directly opposite him. Had I known what was coming, I might have tried to be as far away from him as was possible. He was of medium height, had a nice, open face, and did not appear very threatening. He stood there, legs apart, looking at us in a rather indifferent way. Then, in a rapid voice he barked out an order



in German: "Put your caps in front of you, on the ground. Deposit all your valuables; watches, rings, fountain pens, money, jewelry, into the cap. Don't move! Anybody who moves, will be shot!"

Instead of explaining how one could follow his order without moving, he suddenly opened fire. Two young people, one standing next to me, fell to the ground, mortally wounded. His premeditated cruel action produced the desired results; hats and caps quickly filled with watches, rings and cash. I gave up a tiny travel clock, and a Waterman pen with a golden tip, a birthday present from friends. Others emptied their pockets, bags, and hidden places in their clothing, to surrender at one horrifying moment their lives' savings. A middle aged dentist, whose name was Zajontz, took out a large wad of paper money and deposited it in his hat. Dr. Zajontz told me later that the money he gave up amounted to 70 thousand Polish zlotys a sizable sum at the time.

Apparently the SS-man was satisfied with his loot. He dismissed us with a wave of his hand, and everybody run away from the place in a hurry. The two victims, dead by now, remained on the ground, oblivious to the goings on.

A few young prisoners were ordered by the killer to collect the valuables in large boxes, and to carry them to his office, in one of the brick buildings outside the camp. One of them, a POW from Konskowola, told me later that there was so much money scattered on the floor of the killer's office that he had to use a broom to sweep it all together. Carpenters were given the task of building sturdy wooden crates, and the loot was packed in them.

There were rumors that most of the stuff was addressed to the Reichsbank in Berlin, but some of it went also to the Sudetenland town of Neustadt, addressed to a Frau Feix. By then I knew



already that the brutal SS-man with his nice face was Oberschar-fuehrer Reinhold Feix. A former barber from prewar part of Czechoslovakia known as Sudetenland, he was nicknamed "doctor" Feix by the inmates, for his method of "healing" the sick by shooting.

Several days later Handtke, the camp commandant, whom, by the way, I never saw, departed for some other assignment, and Feix took over. His terrible reign began.

When I recovered sufficiently from the shock of that morning, I decided to look the place over. I felt that it was important to familiarize myself with my new "home."

Budzyn at that time was a forced labor camp, whose physical layout was rather typical. There were about a dozen wooden barracks, of a type formerly used by the German cavalry as horse stables, laid out in a parallel pattern. Opposite the sixth barrack was the gate, where an armed Ukrainian was always on duty. The last building, to the left of the gate, accommodated a warehouse, where food and clothing were stored. This facility was supervised by a tall, dour Viennese Jew, Herr Gelbart. A part of that barrack provided also work places for camp tailors, barbers, and other artisans.

The centrally located Revier consisted of several small rooms, where the medical personnel had their sleeping quarters. There double bunks served as beds. One large room accommodated the infirmary. Here an elderly man from Krasnik, a pharmacist, kept medical supplies, most of them brought, ironically, from his own, shut down pharmacy. In the rear of this barrack four-tiered, shelflike structures, served at one time as beds for the patients. This part of the Revier remained unoccupied at the time of my arrival. The actual hospital was located outside the camp proper, in one of the brick buildings.



All other barracks had similar four-tiered bunks, with straw mattresses and blankets. The last building on the right of the gate housed the kitchen.

Near the rear fence, somewhere between the Revier and the kitchen, stood the latrine, protected from the elements by a wooden overhead roof. Adjoining the latrine, a grossly inadequate and primitive washroom, consisting of several cold water faucets, and a few shower heads, was to serve the hygienic needs of several thousand people. And finally, to the left of the warehouse was the so called "Mist-haufen" (garbage-dump), often used as the execution place. Eventually, that area became filled with rows of mass graves.

The daily routine of the Budzyn inmates was essentially similar to the routines of countless other camp inmates, incarcerated across occupied Europe. At the crack of dawn there was that awful scream of the orderlies, known in camps as kapos, but at Budzyn called "Companie-Fuehrers" (company leaders)-a reflection of the POW's influence- which woke everybody up, with the possible exception of those who died during the night. People dressed quickly and run to the latrine or the washroom. Those who had enough energy left, would try to shave. This accomplished, they would line up for the morning coffee, which by that time was brought to the individual barracks by two inmates, assigned to that task by the block leader the night before. Those with a strong will had a piece of bread left over from the night before, to eat with their hot liquid. By the way, that ersatz coffee was often used by inmates for shaving or washing, this being the only hot liquid available to them.

Inmates then lined up by blocks for the roll call. At Budzyn these blocks were known as companies, again, because the POW's were in internal charge. An SS-man would arrive, the various Companie Fuehrers reported the numbers of their "troops" to the SS-



man, who entered the figures in a notebook. All prisoners absent from the roll call--the artisans, medical personnel, kitchen staff, the reported sick or dead, had to be accounted for. The total had to match the figure provided by the camp office for that day. If all was well, the prisoners assigned to work in the factory, marched off, guarded by SS and Ukrainian auxiliaries. Strangely I never saw that factory, although I heard a lot about it.

If the total did not add up, there was trouble. The people were forced to stand, rain or shine, hot or cold, until the missing person or persons were accounted for. Occasionally somebody would succeed in escaping and there was always retaliation by the camp authorities. The SS practice was to pick up several victims from the ranks of prisoners at random. No pleading would help the unfortunate prisoners. They were shot while the others were forced to look on.

Toward evening the people would return from work. For a while, as I recall, there existed, in Feix's reign, a small orchestra, which played popular tunes, when people departed for work in the mornings, and on their return in the evening. A soup, made of potatoes, sometimes with bits of meat, or, for unwelcome variety, a soup of yellow turnips, was distributed. A portion of bread, about a half a pound, often moldy, sometimes supplemented by a little red beet marmalade, was supposed to last for the whole day, until the next supper. After the meager meal people had some time to socialize a bit, wash their clothes, and retire for the night.

Within the front section of the barracks, several large pails were placed each night. All night long prisoners with weak bladders had to climb down from their perches to proceed to these pails to urinate. Often these containers would overflow by the morning,



and the resulting stench was unbearable. Unlucky were the prisoners assigned to empty these buckets and to clean up the smelly area.

I was extremely fortunate to escape most of these hardships and dangers, although I was not completely immune to them. Soon after our arrival, my colleague, Chaskiel Chaikin and I, were, on Sztokman's recommendation, assigned to the Revier. There Pinkus, a Krasnik native, and a heavy set woman, Eva, were already working as nurses.

Pinkus introduced us to our new boss, an elderly gentleman from Vienna, dr. Friedrich Foerster. He was a man in his late sixties, under six feet tall, athletic and bursting with energy. This cultured Viennese Jew, who was destined later to play a decisive role in my survival, had been a captain in the Austro-Hungarian navy, a medical officer on a submarine in the First World War, who, for his services was awarded the honorary title of Medizinal-Rat (Medical Councilor).

Married to a Christian, he was completely assimilated, and one of his two daughters, also a physician, was active as a missionary in the Belgian Congo. To my amazement, as I recall, dr. Foerster once showed me a snapshot of one of his grandsons, in the uniform of the "Hitler Jugend", the Nazi youth organization. Yet, Nuremberg laws decreed that he was a Jew after all, and was deported from Vienna, by way of Majdanek, to the Budzyn camp.

However, it would have been hard to find a human being as decent and brave as this unusual Jew. While most Western, particularly German and Austrian Jews, kept usually aloof from our Polish "Ostjuden" (Eastern Jews), this fine man was a concerned, warm hearted and humane physician. He *often* assumed the role of a teacher in the art of healing, quite an accomplishment under



the extreme conditions of a Nazi camp, striving to train our staff.

Due to his position and background, dr. Foerster was permitted to occupy a room in the camp hospital, with his own private modern toilet, a rare privilege in the camps. This hospital was also quite unique. Some distance from the camp gate, it occupied one of the brick buildings, originally designed to house workers of the aircraft factory. Now, of course, these buildings, with indoor plumbing and toilets, so rare in Poland at that time, were occupied mostly by German civilians, who came here to run the Heinkel Werke, a well known German aircraft company.

Two of these buildings were reserved for the camp; one contained the office and living quarters of the camp commandant, the other was the camp hospital. (I suppose that there must have been a third building somewhere, to house the guards.) A guard patrolled the hospital 24 hours a day.

In that hospital, in addition to several rooms on the ground floor, and one story above it, there was also one good sized set of rooms, with a separate entrance, occupied by a dental office. There two dentists from Vienna, dr. Beck and dr. Olesker, the latter originally from the Polish town of Brody, and two dental technicians, labored hard for German "clients." One of the technicians, Rose Mittelman, was a native of Lublin.

#### My Medical Education

Under the tutelage of dr. Foerster, who took a particular liking to me, I was trained to perform intricate medical procedures, including, incredibly, how to apply anesthesia to our patients, about to undergo some minor surgery. (Major surgery was, for obvious reasons, taboo in the camps.). We had a supply of ether and ethylene



chloride for that purpose, and even a face mask for the application of the anesthetic. I also learned to treat some of the most horrendous skin disorders, brought about by poor hygienic conditions and inadequate food. Carbuncles, furuncles, scabies, and other parasitic skin disorder were some of the miseries that afflicted our people, and with which we had to cope.

Another health problem soon surfaced. The slave laborers, being expendable, were not given eye goggles, when working at metal-cutting machines. As a result, tiny metal fragment often became embedded in their eyes. Dr. Foerster taught me how to apply drops to affected eyes to ease pain, and, with a special instrument, to dig out the steel fragments. I would not recommend this rather primitive procedure for normal times, but in our exceptional circumstances it was the only way, and it worked, miraculously, ~~without~~ without complications in all cases I was involved in.

It was highly fortunate that dr. Foerster was able to bring with him from his Vienna office . . (at 17 Schottenfeldgasse) an amazing array of medical instruments, some of them quite antiquated, perhaps better fit for a medical arts museum than for a modern practice. However, under the camp conditions, these instruments were just perfect. Of ingenious yet simple design, they served their purpose, when they were needed. Even the doctor's stethoscope was of an oldfashioned type. Made of wood, it resembled a tall mushroom, with a slightly concave head, and a thin, hollow stem.

I have already written about my missing teeth, which created an unsightly gap in my mouth. As a result of my very friendly relationship with the good-natured dr. Beck, this problem was finally solved. Dr. Beck obtained the necessary permission from the camp commandant, Oberscharfuehrer Feix, which was quite remarkable. I can explain this only by recalling dr. Beck's charming



personality. He must have used his best smile to influence the brute on my behalf. In any case, my tooth saga came to a happy conclusion when I was fitted out with a stainless steel and porcelain bridge at the Budzyn Forced Labor Camp dental laboratory. I was one of the few camp inmates to get this kind of service.

Doctor Foerster, meanwhile, continued his good works. Firm but kindly, he often performed near miracles, in trying to save camp inmates.

One case was particularly difficult, and because of that, remains strongly embedded in my memory. One of the former POW's, a Lithuanian Jew, became seriously ill, and dr. Foerster diagnosed a strangulated hernia. Under normal circumstances an emergency operation would be absolutely essential. Under our set of conditions, this option was completely out of the question.

The doctor decided to try to free the stuck intestines by external manipulation. The young man was put on a wooden table, and held firmly stretched on his back, by our two orderlies. I put a mask on his face and proceeded, on doctor's instructions, to apply ether. The patient quickly lost consciousness. He began to hallucinate and talk rapidly in a strange mixture of Russian, Yiddish and Lithuanian. The doctor explained that if the patient is addicted to alcohol, this kind of strange behavior can occur. He proceeded to use his strong, deft fingers to handle the affected area of the patient's belly. Many minutes past, and the doctor's face became flushed from the strenuous effort. I was beginning to get worried, when the doctor stopped suddenly and announced that he succeeded. We were all thrilled.

My unfriendly teamster from Sadlowice came once to the dispensary to complain about a pain in his chest. The doctor removed the antiquated stethoscope from his satchel and attempted to listen



to Goldberg's heartbeat. I was assisting the doctor at the time and noticed that he kept shifting his instrument, clearly baffled by the former teamster.. Finally he burst out, in mock exasperation: "Don't you have a heart?" Golberg smiled, obviously pleased with himself. To our astonishment he pointed to his right side: "Here, doctor, is my heart." He was one of those rare individuals whose organs were reversed. Could this fact account for his rude behavior toward other people?

Another interesting experience of my medical "career" at Budzyn occurred outside the camp, in a neighboring village. Dr. Foerster was notified that Feix gave his approval for him to proceed to a local peasant, whose wife was gravely ill. There were no other doctors in the vicinity, and the poor peasant most likely could not afford a physician from the nearest town anyway. Our doctor, a slave laborer, was thus summoned. We could only conclude that the surrounding Polish population knew quite a lot about our camp.

On the morning of the following day an Ukrainian guard picked up the doctor and me and escorted us to the ill woman's hut. We walked on a country road and tasted briefly the open fields and the sky above, of a free world. We arrived, too soon, at the village, and the Ukrainian pointed to a typical thatched roof cottage: "Here" he said.

We entered a dimly lit room, where a pale faced, middle aged woman lay on a large bed, propped up by several pillows. Dr. Foerster unceremoniously uncovered the strangely bulging feather quilt, and to my amazement, revealed a belly blown up like a large balloon. No, she was not pregnant, her illness was diagnosed as dropsy, an excessive accumulation of fluid in the ~~abdomen~~ ~~XXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXX~~ body.

The doctor removed from his black satchel an instrument shaped like a small faucet, with a sharp, pointed tip. He asked the



husband of the sick woman, who stood nearby, his humble face full of anxiety, for a pail; I served as <sup>the</sup> interpreter. The doctor then cleaned a suitable area of the incredibly stretched skin with alcohol. Then he quickly pierced the skin with the pointed tip of the instrument and placed the pail under it, on the floor. He turned the faucet on, and soon a foamy, yellow liquid began to fill the pail. I was asked to take the full pail outside, and empty it.

I must have carried at least three such pails outside. I watched in silence the belly of suffering women gradually shrink, as the liquid was drained from her. Eventually the skin settled down on her body like a burst balloon.

The patient's husband, who watched the whole procedure with apprehension, was grateful. He handed the doctor his fee: a half a dozen eggs. On our return to the camp, the doctor and I shared a ~~luxurious~~ omelet, my first eggs since the wild duck eggs at Sadlowice. A few days later we were told that the poor woman died. The doctor expected that; at least she suffered less.

I recall with pain the relentless pursuit after victims by Feix whom the inmates nicknamed "doctor" Feix, for his method of "curing" people by killing them. He had an uncanny instinct to barge in at the most undesirable moment, to our hospital or dispensary. It is impossible for me to describe all these incidents, but the following cases will give a good illustration of his almost daily outrages, committed while he reigned supreme at Budzyn.

Of all the skin disorders, scabies<sup>20</sup> was the most difficult

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<sup>20</sup> Scabies is caused by a tiny itch mite which burrows under the skin, and results in intense itching. The affected person scratches the skin, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ further aggravating the condition.



to cure under the camp conditions. Dr. Foerster got hold from somewhere of a gray ointment, which, to be effective, had to be applied to the whole body. One day, while a middle aged man and his two young sons were in the basement of the hospital, ~~XXXXXX~~ busily applying the salve to their bodies, Feix unexpectedly came in. He inquired about the nature of their disease, and instantly decided on a more radical "cure". He chased the three unfortunate men, naked as they were, partially covered with the gray ointment, to the execution area, and mercilessly shot all three with his automatic weapon.

Bad and grossly inadequate nutrition often cause diarrhea in our patients. Feix entered one of our wards one time, took a sniff and immediately ordered one unlucky patient out of the hospital and into the killing area.

Still another time, a middle aged man developed an ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ infection in his right thumb from a cut he suffered while peeling potatoes in the camp kitchen. Our doctor opened the infected area, cleaned it, and applied a dressing. The man was told to come every second day for a change of dressing. The thumb was almost healed when Feix appeared during a periodic dressing, did not like what he saw and took the man away. Summoned by us doctor Foerster pleaded with the killer to spare the man, telling him that the patient is ready to return to work. Feix was unwilling to change his mind. He would not even let the victim retrieve his glasses- the man was nearsighted- so impatient was he to kill the Jewish "Untermensch" (subhuman).

Soon after these, and other misdeeds of Feix, camp inmates nicknamed him "doctor" Feix, proving that even in extreme adversity our fellow Jews did not lose their sense of humor, of the



black variety in this case.

### Escape of the Camp Leaders.

The internal administration of the camp at that time was in the hands of a group of former POW's, who were brought to Budzyn from their camp at Lipowa street in Lublin. As I discussed it earlier, these were Jewish soldiers of the defeated Polish army, who lived before the war in eastern Poland, later occupied by the Soviet Union, and now-this is 1942-under German rule.

One cold January morning, about two month after my arrival at Budzyn, two senior leaders, accompanied by two young, attractive women prisoners, all dressed in overcoats and high boots, showed up at our hospital, outside the camp. One of the men had a minor cut on his hand, which needed dr. Foerster's attention, or so they claimed. They left shortly afterwards, and we did not think much ~~XXXXXXXX~~ about it.

That evening news spread that the four managed to elude the guard outside the hospital and escaped into the woods, allegedly taking with them some weapons. The SS and their helpers, the Ukrainians, fanned out in all directions in search of the escapees.

In our innocence we did not think this would affect us in any way. But Feix thought otherwise. He appeared at the hospital, demanding to see the "Chefarzt" (Head doctor). He was in an ugly mood. Screaming the usual obscenities, he accused us of being a part of a conspiracy to help the four in their escape. He threatened to shoot us all. Dr. Foerster calmly (only he could remain calm in face of such threats) explained to the fuming Feix that we were totally unaware of their plan to escape and that one of them needed medical attention, which was provided.

Feix eventually calmed down, and issued the following blood



chilling order: "I want all of you, and your patients, out of the building in half an hour. The patients are to leave as they are. They can wrap themselves in blankets, but clothing and shoes are to be left behind." The road to the camp was covered with thick snow, and the temperature outside was in the low teens. Feix departed and we were left with a formidable task.

We had no choice but to obey that inhuman order. We helped our patients out of their upper and lower bunks, wrapped them as well as we could in their blankets, (underneath they only wore long sleeping shirts) and began our terrible trek back to an unheated camp barrack.

Our approximately fifty patients suffered from a variety of illnesses. Several had high fever. Some suffered from hunger edema, one had a broken leg. All were barefoot. Our four nurses, myself included, the two orderlies, and dr. Foerster assisted the worst cases. I was assigned to assist the man with the broken leg. He bravely hobbled on his sound leg, while leaning on my shoulder for the want of a crutch.

Some years back I remembered seeing a painting depicting a group of Polish political prisoners in old tsarist times, on their trek to Siberian exile. Men, women, and children, marched through deep snow, surrounded by knout wielding cossacks on horses. I recalled the feeling of ~~XXXXXXXX~~ great sadness and sympathy for the victims this picture evoked in me. In my wildest imagination, however, would I not picture myself going through a similar experience, marching in deep snow, with barefoot, sick people, shivering under their thin blankets, some feverish and hallucinating, surrounded by German and Ukrainian "cossacks".

But that was precisely what was happening at the moment. The moon was out, the marchers were silent, and the whole scene was



unreal. We finally reached the barrack, where we normally maintained our dispensary during the day. The place was ice cold. We helped our stoically silent patients to their bunks, covered them with their blankets, and retreated to the front room. None of the staff could sleep that night. Dr. Foerster was up with us all night, discussing with us the implications of what just occurred. We were quite unable to understand the turn of events, unfolding in this miserable place called Budzyn.

Day arrived. We were dead tired, chilled and scared. Soon news spread that the Nazis captured three POW's, who escaped from the Lipowa street camp, and <sup>had</sup> the misfortune to find themselves near Budzyn. Apparently the escape of our leaders and the others just caught, was prompted by rumors that the Germans planned to liquidate the Lublin camp, and execute all POW's.

The three captive men bore the brunt of Feix's wrath. From the front of our new quarters we could clearly see the tragic sight outside the camp perimeter. Three naked bodies were strung up by their feet on three posts. We could see Feix and several Ukrainians hitting them repeatedly with whips. The screams of the tortured victims, and their pleas to be shot, would move a stone. But not Feix.

He was pitiless. The victims hung for full three days, until their bodies could not take it any longer, and they died a martyr's death. This was one of the worst atrocities I have seen, although in the days to come, I was destined to see many tragedies.

Feix calmed down after this terrible episode, and left us in peace for a while. To our relief, the four who escaped were not found.

While aiding our patients on that terrible march from the hospital to the camp, we wondered how many of them would survive the ordeal. Under best of conditions, even healthy people, when forced



to march barefoot, half naked, in snow and frost, would suffer some deterioration in their health. And here were people, sick, undernourished, some feverish, all weakened by the incredibly harsh camp life.

But, to our surprise and elation, none of our patients showed any lasting effects of the sudden eviction from the hospital. We were able, several days later, to report to dr. Foerster, that all was well. Everybody was amazed at the will to live and resiliency of our people.

The escaped leaders, the original excuse for our difficulty, did not, however, fare as well. Information reached the camp that all four perished a few days after their escape. Nobody knew how these heroic four people died, but all of us were aware of the dangers awaiting any Jew venturing out into the Polish countryside. Aside from the Germans and their henchmen, they had to face an often hostile local populace, on whose good will their survival depended in large measure. A further threat came from the partisans, who, with the possible exception of Soviet and Polish left groups, were dangerous to Jews. Contrary to Jewish expectations, the fact that the Germans were a common enemy, did not rally too many gentiles to the Jewish cause.

### "Musulmen" And Other Problems

The Revier staff settled down to a new round of problems, without the advantages of the outside hospital.

Routinely, after the bulk of inmates marched off for work each morning, there was always a sizable group of people, who for one reason or another, were left behind. Most of these people were excused from work for a day or two, to enable them to recover from some ailment. But, with ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~



the conditions not improving, hunger diseases made their ominous appearances. Edema, a swelling of the face, legs, and feet, became widespread. In one particularly extreme case, the man was unable to walk. He came to the dispensary, crawling on his hands and feet, and left puddles of fluid in his wake.

Doctor Foerster, disturbed, as we on the staff were, called a meeting to discuss possible measures to be taken to help these people. Our decision was to request Feix to supply us, on a daily basis, with carrots, onions and garlic, which we would distribute to the needy. Our hope was that Feix would listen to our good doctor for whom he showed a modicum of respect, when the two met for any reason.

To our great surprise and relief, Feix, in one of his better moods, granted our request, submitted to him, naturally, by Dr. Foerster. And so, for several weeks, hungry inmates would line up in the mornings in front of our dispensary, where our staff happily distributed a couple of nourishing carrots, an onion, and a few cloves of garlic to each person. It did some good, at least for a while.

But Feix was a moody, unpredictable character, who was not accustomed to doing good deeds. Soon the evil demons took over again. He worked out a scheme to make our daily existence even more miserable. Our daily bread ration now came covered with mold. When fresh bread arrived, he purposely kept it for days in the warehouse along with the stale and moldy older bread, until it too became covered with green mold.

Bread was the most basic, most crucial nutrient in our meager diet. Again our indefatigable doctor thought of approaching Feix on this matter. Feix was amused. He thought the problem was very funny. As our doctor related to us later, Feix said to him:



"Dr. Foerster, I am very much surprised by you. Don't you know that that kind of bread is very healthy and nourishing for your people?" And that was the end of that attempt at intervention. Eventually Feix got tired of his game, or relented. The bread distributed to us was only speckled with green mold here and there.

The combination of extreme hardships, relentless tension, and above all, hunger, became too much for some inmates. They could not cope anymore and were ready to give up all struggle. Nicknamed "Musulmen"<sup>21</sup>, these doomed individuals defied all our efforts to help them. They now became a permanent feature of our camp life.

As if that was not enough, a new disaster struck our camp. Patients with high fever and all the familiar symptoms of typhus--the dreaded "Fleckfieber"--started to report to our Revier. Unlike Koniskowola, where we had complete control of the measures to be taken, here Feix was the supreme ruler, and we became fully aware of the gravity of our situation.

It was the duty of our "Chefarzt" to report each morning to Oberscharfuehrer Feix, and submit to him details of various illnesses in the camp. Spotted fever was a very serious matter.

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<sup>21</sup> The expression "musulman" was the camp term describing individuals who lost their will to live. The origin of the term stems probably from the Moslem belief in fate-Kismet--which no human effort can change, since it is ordained by God-Allah. Consequently, "musulmen" were people, who were ready to die to end their suffering. Present in most camps, they were characterized by the emaciated, skeleton-like appearance, vacant eyes, a shuffling, slow gait, and indifference to their fate. Once an inmate reached that stage, a reversal was, under camp conditions, very rare.

Another explanation for the term "Musulman" that these people resembled in their appearance praying Moslems, seems to me far fetched.



Germans dreaded that disease. Indeed, based on my own observation, patients suffering from typhus were more likely to recover if they came from Eastern Europe. Apparently they were more immune to its effects, perhaps because hygienic conditions in that part of Europe were inferior, and people acquired a sort of genetic immunity to the infection, carried by the body louse. While I do not know how scientific this view is, it is nevertheless my experience that Westerners, including Central and West European Jews, succumbed to the disease more often than Polish or Russian born patients.

In any case, while the SS did not need any excuse to kill Jews, it was clear that they would certainly not tolerate a disease which might spread and affect German civilians in the Heinkel factory and the SS-men themselves. It is worth recalling that in Warsaw, before the ghetto was enclosed by a wall, the Nazis put big signs up on street corners adjoining the Jewish quarters, telling Germans to stay out of the area because of the alleged danger of typhus.

Once again, dr. Foerster proved himself an extraordinary human being. He decided to deceive Feix by telling him that we have many cases of flu, "Grippe" in German. All of us knew that this was a very risky undertaking, and foresaw the very likely possibility of a German civilian at the factory, where our people mingled with them freely, of becoming infected. But there was really no choice. The alternative meant only slaughter of many, perhaps even the end of the camp.

Over a brief period of perhaps two months, about two hundred cases of typhus passed through the Revier. While there were at that time vaccines available on the market, they were, naturally, not meant to be used by us-"Untermenschen." We had to content ourselves with placebos. Luckily, dr. Foerster discovered, among the treasures our pharmacist brought with him, two powders. One was bismuth,



the other was charcoal. The first powder was white, the second was, naturally, black.

Dr. Foerster quickly made up his mind. "We must give something to our patients," he said. "Let's distribute these powders three times daily; they can't hurt, and might even do some good." As an experienced and humane physician, he strongly believed that a patient must not be ignored, but given something, even if it's just a placebo.

And so, three times a day, the four of<sup>us</sup> nurses made the rounds, distributing our black or white powders. The task was not an easy one. To reach each patient, we had to cover all four tiers of the bunks, assist the sick in swallowing the unpalatable stuff, and supply them with water for that purpose.

How effective was this action, meant merely to boost the morale of our patients? With the passage of time my memory of the effect of these powders on the sick people became blurred, until May 1964, when I received a postcard from my wife's beloved aunt, Sylvia Englestein, who at that time run an egg farm in Lakewood, New Jersey, with her husband Joe. One of their neighbors, Mr. and Mrs Engel, were Budzyn survivors. Reading that card made me appreciate more fully the impact of these powders on the well being of some of these people.

This is what aunt Sylvia reported: Once while engaged in a neighborly chat, she mentioned to Martha Engel that her niece was married to a Holocaust survivor. When she heard my name, "Malkale" as she was known then, identified me as her savior. I quote here verbatim from the postcard: "...she had typhus. The doctor had given her up, but you came around three times a day and climbed to the high perch, (of course, she was wrong in assuming that the doctor gave up on her; that was her own assumption, as was her faith in me, I.A.)



where she lay and forced the black powder upon her which she says saved her life."

I did not care to inform Mrs. Engel that the magic black powder was nothing more than medicinal charcoal...(Her husband, Mr. Engel apparently also had a claim on me, as I found out during the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in 1983, at Washington, D.C. Some mutual friends told me that Mr. Engel was pulled out by me from a massacre of typhus patients. That was the story he told them. Frankly, I don't remember him, it could well have been the case. This was not a matter of heroics. More about the massacre follows.)

The catastrophe we all knew must eventually come, did indeed materialize. When doctor Foerster appeared one morning in the camp office, with his usual report of many cases of flu, Feix exploded: "Doctor, you are lying. What you have is typhus, and I will take care of it tomorrow morning."

As we feared all along, a German "Meister" (Foreman) became infected, and a civilian doctor diagnosed typhus. Dr. Foerster returned to the Revier badly shaken.

There was no time to loose. We had an emergency meeting of the staff and made up a list of all patients who could safely leave the hospital because they were past the critical stage of the disease. We immediately sent all those "lucky" people back to their barracks. It was terrible to do this to them, because they were weak and exhausted, as I well knew from my own experience, but there was no choice in this matter.

About 15 to 20 patients were unable to leave and we were sure that their end is near. We also feared for our own lives. Those of us who knew about the coming tragedy slept little that



night.

In the early morning Feix and his Ukrainians marched up to the entrance to the Revier. "Los, los, alle heraus!" (Fast, fast, all out) came Feix's command. The panic stricken patients dressed quickly as well as they could, with the staff's assistance. Our attempts at calming them down were fruitless. They knew what was coming.

Our whole group, including doctor Foerster and the staff, were ordered to march to the usual execution area. We tried to assist and comfort those unable to walk by themselves. While I tried to be calm, I was not sure if any of us will survive this death march.

On arrival at the place, Feix ordered the staff to step aside and immediately the Ukrainian guards opened fire. Feix, standing three feet from me, personally shot a young boy of about 15.

Inspired by our courageous doctor, Chaikin and I still tried to rescue some people. I do not know how, but we succeeded in a few cases, as did the doctor. Among the lucky ones was Mr. Engel, the husband of Martha Engel from Lakewood, according to ~~XXXXXX~~ George Topas, another Budzyn survivor, and a Lakewood resident.

One rescue attempt, which failed, still haunts me today, over ~~fifty five~~ years later. At our pleadings, Feix permitted one middle aged man to return to his barrack. The doomed man, in his haste to get out of the hospital, lost one shoe. Now, watched ~~XXXXXX~~ by Feix and his henchmen, he started to walk away. Weakened by the disease, the man walked slowly, trying his best to appear strong. But the missing shoe made him wobble to one side, as he moved. This was his undoing. The impatient Feix uttered his usual: "Scheisse!" (Shit) and shot the man in the back. A life for a shoe.

The tragedy was not over yet. Feix left and the Ukrainians



threw the murdered patients into open pits. An Ukrainian spotted one victim still breathing. He called over another guard, and pointing at the mortally wounded man, said: "See that 'Jude'? I am not going to waste another bullet on him!" I happened to be at the moment at the other end of the pit and saw the dreadful scene. He picked up a large rock from the edge of the pit and threw it at the head of the dying man. "He is kaput!" The thug was satisfied.

Before Feix left, his bloody mission accomplished, he gave the Revier staff permission to withdraw, warning our doctor to remember never to deceive him again. Once again we were reprieved.

We, the survivors, returned to the infirmary, exhausted and in turmoil. We were safe for the time being, and managed to rescue some individuals, but also lost a good number of innocent people. By our estimate, at least fifteen men died in the massacre.

A few days later the commandant ordered the Revier to relocate back to our original building, outside the camp. We were relieved but not surprised. The Germans, despite their irrational hatred of the Jews, were practical enough to realize that it is in their best interest to have the hospital isolated from the camp.

### Autopsies.

Feix, who continued to dominate our lives at Budzyn, was a very restless character. As if driven by some inner demons, his moods would often change within minutes. The Jews of the nearby ghetto of Krasnik, hoping to appease him (he must have been giving them a hard time also) bought him a horse. He would often ride around on this horse, a leather whip in his hand, searching for "wrongdoers". Then, suddenly, he would change his mind, gallop back to his house, switch to his motorcycle, and roar off in a cloud of dust.

After executing a young boy for being infested with "too many



lice", Feix unexpectedly developed an interest in "Jewish diseases", as he labeled them. He pestered dr. Foerster with pointed questions about certain disease symptoms, when the doctor appeared mornings to report to him on the state of health of the inmates.

When a few of our patients died of unknown causes, Feix ordered autopsies to find the causes, as if that really mattered to him. So, as a result of his whim, Chaikin and I had to assist the doctor in these new to us procedures. Feix, to our dismay, "invited" himself to be present at some of these grisly events. Foerster, as always calm and competent, assumed the role of a pathology professor, lecturing Feix on the intricacies of the human body, as if Feix was just a student and nothing else.

Our "student" seemed to derive a perverse pleasure from observing the exposed innards of the cadavers, while Chaikin and I, not accustomed to these autopsies, were at first quite ill from the effect of participating in them, particularly when Feix was present. Eventually, the human ability to adapt took over, and both of us were able to assist the doctor, without problems.

There was a very difficult case of a ~~XXXXXXXX~~ pregnant woman, whose husband was also an inmate in the camp. She was about to go into labor, and we knew that her life was in danger, should Feix find out. I was relieved and perhaps also a little disappointed, when told that somebody else was going to assist the doctor in the delivery, the only such case at Budzyn. I know that the woman came out all right, but I never saw a baby.

Dr. Foerster, my savior

The most dramatic day in my life occurred when Feix suddenly appeared in the infirmary, while I was busy fixing up my berth. He immediately noticed my knapsack, which was stored on the bed. "Let me see that knapsack" he barked. I saw with alarm that he was in an ugly mood. He began to go through the content, tossing



things to the floor, after a cursory glance at each item. At that time I still had in my ~~possession~~ possession most of the documents, photos and other precious mementos. Among the photos were some lovely pictures of Bronka and of my family. He looked at the pictures and remarked, with sarcasm in his voice, "Du hast viele Weiber!" (You have many women) In reality, most of the pictures were of Bronka, from different periods.

Among the papers was one which I feared most, should Feix discover it. It was a baptismal certificate of a young Christian, of my age, given to me by some Warsaw Friends, in case I should decide to become an "Aryan." The possession of such a document would doom me instantly. To my great relief, Feix, not familiar with Polish, tossed it, along with other documents, to the floor, and immediately put my foot on it, just in case.

He found, unfortunately, two items, which almost cost me my life. One was an empty brass cartridge from a bullet, which I carelessly kept in the knapsack. In those days fellows working in the machine shop of the factory were able to fashion cigarette lighters from these spent cartridges. I was planning to ask one of my friends there to make one for me. Although I was not a smoker, possession of such item could sometimes be of some help in acquiring food or other necessity.

I could not, in my right mind, explain this to Feix, so I kept quiet. He exploded: "Verdammt Jude!" Then he found in one of the pockets a watch. This pocket watch was given to me by my coworker Eva, who was ill at the time, for safe keeping. I should explain here that each of our nurses was given a watch for pulse taking and time monitoring in the Revier. But here Feix found a second watch in my possession and he was furious. I tried, in vain, to explain the origin of the watch. He would not listen. "Schweine



Hund! Du bist kaputt!" he screamed. Then, in a calmer voice he uttered the ominous order: "Follow me!" My situation became hopeless.

My would be executioner immediately took off in the direction of the "Misthaufen". On the way we were joined by Sztokman, who was now in charge of the camp administration. This cheered me up a bit. There was a chance that, for the sake of our friendship, he will plead with Feix for my life. But I overestimated Sztokman's courage or willingness to intervene on my behalf. It is also possible that he was not aware of the critical for me ~~SIXTH~~ situation. My heart sank when I became aware of the topic of their low key conversation; some trivial administrative matter. Now I knew that I was lost. Once Feix decided to kill, there was no way out. He never changed his mind.

We continued to walk, and I remained quite calm. At that moment my whole life- I was 25 at the time- flashed through my mind. Silently I was saying good bye to everybody and everything. Like a prisoner who, doomed to die, puffs on his last cigarette, as long as he can, I tried to postpone my end. I tried to keep calm, knowing that any sign of despair might trigger Feix to shoot me immediately.

Anybody watching our group could easily assume that the three of us were engrossed in a deep discussion of some camp problem. But my fate was not yet sealed. Unknown to me, my colleague Chaskiel Chaikin<sup>21</sup> (now in Israel) who must have seen the encounter I had with Feix, hastened to the hospital, to alert dr. Foerster, who rushed over to reach us.

Meanwhile we arrived at the execution place, and Feix, without wasting any time, barked to me: "Ausziehen!" (Undress) It was the common practice of the Nazi murderers to save the clothing of



21 Some time ago after I received, in some promotional material, a copy of Schindler's list, I found Chaikin's name on it.



their victims, for recirculation, or for shipment to Germany. Almost automatically, I started to get undressed, knowing that resistance was hopeless, and that an infuriated Feix might subject me to torture and harm other people as well.

Suddenly doctor Foerster, the courageous, brave doctor Foerster, breathlessly rushed up. Feix angrily turned to him: "Was wollen Sie?" (what do you want); Feix never addressed the doctor in the second person "du"; he somehow respected him, and always used, when addressing him, the more polite 'Sie'.

Dr. Foerster answered in a firm, determined voice: "I need this man in the Revier, he is a good worker, I can't afford to loose him!" Feix exploded: "He is guilty of a crime and he is going to die!" Dr. Foerster persisted. Feix, with all his ferocity, had some weakness for our chief. After all, he was not an ordinary "Ostjude" (An Eastern European Jew). Also, the doctor took care of his real or imagined illnesses, and sometimes gave him health massages. He relented, a thing unheard of in the Budzyn camp.

I was still partially dressed. "Let down your pants and bend over" he ordered. Next, he called over a Jewish orderly, known in the camp as "Gayle Moishe" (Redhead Moshe). He handed him his whip and instructed him to administer fifty lashes on my naked buttocks. Then he turned to me; "You will call out each hit, until you counted to fifty."

By the time I received about 25 lashes, the pain was so great, I inadvertendly skipped one number and called out in a weakened voice: "Siebenund zwanzig" (27). Feix was outraged. He stopped Moshe and took the whip out of his hand. He declared that the orderly, being a deceiving Jew, was not forceful enough. He took over the beating, while doctor Foerster and Sztokman looked on. "Start again the count from one!" he commanded. I received about another



fifty lashes. Finally satisfied, Feix abruptly left. I fainted. Dr. Foerster and others carried me to my cot where I remained for several days. My body was bloody, covered with welts, and the skin resembled a scrambled rainbow.

A few of my friends resolved to cheer me up after that near fatal encounter with the Scharfuehrer. They procured somewhere a bottle of a vile, home made wodka, known in the Polish slang as "Bimber". It tasted strongly of kerosene, but, to celebrate my rescue, I drank a glassful of it anyway. Naturally, as a consequence, I became violently ill. Moreover, the memory of that awful drink lingered in my subconscious for many years. Whenever I was offered some wodka, I invariably reacted with a feeling of nausea. I had to abstain. Lately this feeling seems to have dissipated; I am able to tolerate an occasional sip of wodka, especially since commercially produced wodka is quite unlike that "Bimber".

That summer Feix brought his family for an extended vacation at the Budzyn "resort". Most likely he wanted to show off his "Kingdom". I never saw his wife, but had the dubious pleasure to encounter his young son, a boy of about seven. Dressed in a miniature SS uniform, with a small pistol in his belt, and a small leather whip in his hand, he looked like a miniature of his father. I was told that several times this little Nazi participated in beating his and whipping of some of his father's victims. I assume that he grew into a fine young German...

My subsequent encounter with Feix occurred under different circumstances. He came to the doctor's office, which also doubled as the doctor's home, complaining of a bad back, and demanded a massage. His dog, a German shepherd, was with him.

The small room was equipped with a table, a couple of chairs, and a couch. Feix proceeded to remove his uniform and the belt



with his pistol <sup>st</sup>apped to it. I just came back from the kitchen, where I received a portion of boiled beef for the doctor, which I kept in my pocket, wrapped in some paper. I was very worried that the SS trained dog might sniff it out, and there would be hell to pay, since that meat was obtained illegally. On the other hand, there was that pistol, staring at me from the table, while the Oberscharfuehrer<sup>r</sup> was busy being massaged by the doctor, and chatting all the while.

The thought went through my head that I ought to grab that pistol and shoot the now so vulnerable Feix. I became very agitated at the idea that I could, with one bullet, get rid of our tormentor. But I hesitated. Feix and his friends were usually very confident that nothing would happen to them. They had us all in their power. Collective responsibility was a powerful tool in the Nazi arsenal, and nothing could be done about it. I had no right to endanger others. I was forced to abandon my instinctive desire for revenge, lest the whole camp is wiped out as a result.

I often wondered if the constant search for victims by Feix and subsequent camp commandants, was on their own initiative, or done purposely, on orders from above. My later experiences in other camps, confirmed by postwar revelations, made it quite clear that the pattern of cruelty and murder was really the norm in all camps. It was basically a well calculated method of keeping the inmates constantly terrorized and subjugated. Sometimes there were also specifically local factors.

That specifically local "rationale" for Feix's behavior was the fact that he was in charge of liquidating the remnants of the Jewish population in the vicinity of Budzyn, and from time to time some small group of Jews, both men and women, were brought to the Budzyn camp. They were spared instant death for reasons only Feix and his superiors knew. His policy of killing individual



Jews in the camp for various "reasons" was then his way of keeping the overall size of the camp population under control. I must add here that, while Feix found his victims almost daily, I concentrate mostly on cases where I was directly involved, since obviously, these incidents remain most vivid in my memory.

Another of my unfortunate encounters with Feix occurred some time after his attempt to kill me. He appeared, as usual, unannounced, at the hospital. He inspected the wards, and spotted a couple of cigarette butts on the floor. Enraged, he ordered the whole staff: Chaikin, Pinkus, the two young orderlies, and myself, (although I was at the time elsewhere) to assemble at the roll call area.

Feix soon galloped up on his horse and ordered us to march over to the camp cesspool, an open hole in the ground, filled with foul smelling water. He demanded that we empty the hole in thirty minutes. He would be back then to check. The Ukrainian ruffians surrounded us, and gleefully proceeded to harass us and push us to the edge of the hole. We were given pails and reluctantly began the nasty task of emptying the stinking pit. Each of us was in turn pushed into the hole by our guards, and fell, up to our chests, into the grimy liquid. The more desperate we became, the more the Ukrainians liked it. They howled with revolting laughter. We knew that without assistance we would never be able to empty the pit. Meanwhile the beastly guards were having a good time, pushing and shoving us, all the while joking and screaming obscenities.

Finally, attracted by the noise, Sztokman appeared. He quickly mobilized as many inmates as he could muster. They formed a chain, and full pails were swiftly passed along to a disposal area. The pit was empty. The others dispersed and we were left alone to face what was yet to come.

Feix again galloped up on his horse. "Well, you did a good job!



Did you do it alone?" There was no use lying. I stepped forward and admitted that some people helped us. He turned to the guards and gave them instructions for further punishment, then rode away.

Our suffering was just beginning. The guards ordered us to return to the "Appell Platz." Their leader, Otto, ordered us to pick up heavy wooden beams, stored nearby, and, while holding a beam in both hands in front of us, to jump, froglike, in a crouching position, while Feix's dog snarled at us, trying to bite our smelly bodies.

I did my best to keep the beast away with the help of the wooden beam. Holding the heavy beam aloft, while jumping in the crouching position, soon became intolerable. I fainted. A pail of cold water, poured on me by one of the Ukrainians, revived me. The same thing happened to others. Incredibly, that torture went on for several hours. Eventually the guards got tired of the game. They summoned their chief, who this time rode up on his motorcycle. Otto, the alleged "Volkdeutsche", gave him a full report of our "activities" in his broken German. Feix was apparently satisfied and ordered us back to our duties "sofort." (immediately). We were half dead from exhaustion.

This last experience had a devastating effect on the medical staff's morale. The fear of Feix and of his constantly changing moods made all of us even more tense than was the case with the other inmates. Most of them spent their days at work in the factory, where Feix, in deference to the German managers, did not interfere. As a result, we, in the camp all day, bore the brunt of his whims. Every time he appeared at the Revier, we prepared ourselves for a new calamity.

Naturally, the other people who stayed behind in the camp, had their problems with Feix. In the camp there were very few places to hide, and no shortage of candidates for his "treatment".



with dead bodies, only thinly covered with dirt. Apparently this was the execution area for Jews from the neighboring towns. It was <sup>new</sup> to us, <sup>night</sup> and filled the two of us with gloom. On the guard's order, we tilted the stretcher over the pit, and the body of the martyred woman gently rolled down to the bottom, to join the other victims.

On our way back, we spotted, some distance away, a large group of people, men, women, and children, led by armed Ukrainian auxiliaries, and a few SS-men with submachine guns and dogs, marching in the direction of the killing grounds we just left. The doomed group was strangely silent. Marching in the first row was a very tall, thin man, dressed in the orthodox garb, maybe the local rabbi. The whole group, at least about a hundred and fifty people, in their deathly silence, with the tall man in front, appeared ghostlike to me.

We switched to a trot, not wishing to be near the coming tragedy. As we passed some brick buildings, where the German civilians lived, we noticed quite a few of them on the roofs of their buildings, clearly intent on watching the coming "spectacle." After the war they will most likely claim that they did not know what happened to the Jews.

Before reaching the camp gate, we heard the clatter of machine gun fire.. Very depressed, Chajkin and I returned to the Revier. To this day, whenever my thoughts turn to those terrible years, (this happens much too often), I see ~~the~~ that ghostlike group marching to its doom. The tall man at the head of the group. The terror stricken women and children. The killers, with their efficient weapons. The silence. No tears shed, no pleadings for mercy, no escape from the inevitable. The curious Germans on the roofs, safe and cheerful. The Holocaust.

I do not remember whether we shared the tragic news of what we just saw with anybody. Most likely we kept it to ourselves, not wanting to add to the woes of our friends.



## Feix's Helpers

Unterscharfuehrer Stoschek was Feix's deputy. A stocky, middle aged man, with a not unpleasant face, he was the exact opposite of his superior. Mild mannered, talkative, and sometimes even friendly, he used to come to our quarters for an occasional chat.

Once, as I recall, he came to our place, and ~~he~~ engaged in a spirited discussion about reading, claiming that he can read from a distance. Doctor Foerster was present at the time. To demonstrate his unusual ability, Stoshek unceremoniously stretched himself out on <sup>one</sup> of our lower bunks, put a book down on the floor, (it must have been one of the doctor's German books) and <sup>read</sup> aloud quite well. A "cultured fellow" this SS-man.

But this avid reader could also be an avid killer. Sometime after the reading episode, he appeared at the Revier, and, to our great dismay, discovered a young patient with meningitis. The patient was hallucinating and talking incessantly. Stoschek was disturbed. "Der Man ist ferrueck~~t~~" he pronounced. (The man is crazy.) Stoschek wasted no time. He ordered Chaikin, and me to put the still talking patient on a stretcher, and to follow him. ~~XXX~~ Unfortunately our doctor was not around, and nobody else could approach the SS-man with protestations. We found ourselves at the execution area, where the "cultured" SS-man ordered us to put the stretcher down. He removed the pistol from his holster, and calmly shot the innocent, feverish man in the head. Our only consolation was the fact that the victim was unaware to the last minute of what was happening to him.

There were others. Bydzewski, a tall, handsome individual, a neat dresser, was in charge of the Ukrainian auxiliaries. Probably of Polish extraction, he was not particularly cruel, "only"



efficient as an executor of Feix's orders. A short, squat, perpetually drunk Otto, mentioned earlier, with a cruel and coarse face, was the next in command of the guards.

Other, less visible Ukrainians were Nikitin, Orlow, Pogorielow. Occasionally, when things were quiet in the camp, and Feix was away on some business, they would talk to me. Sometimes the subject was politics, and once we even got into a discussion of the meaning of Marxism-Leninism! They told me their stories, perhaps as a sort of apology for their role in our persecution. All Ukrainian guards at Budzyn were former Red Army soldiers, who, after their capture by the Germans, were offered a choice: either they join the SS auxiliaries or die of starvation.<sup>23</sup> They, of course, preferred to live. While their choice was, objectively speaking, understandable, their cruelty was beyond the call of duty.

Orlow was one of the more colorful characters among them. A student at Leningrad University, he was drafted when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. He was very immature and quite primitive. He wore several watches on his left arm, and the task of winding them up, taking them off, and putting them on again, occupied a lot of his time when he was on sentry duty at the gate. Once I was able to observe him, while he was busy with his watches. He was apparently upset, because one of his watches stopped working. He shook it violently several times, dropped it to the ground, cursing, then kicked it, and finally, stepped on it in helpless rage.

Among these characters were a few decent individuals, who could not acquiesce in their role. One day there was a big commotion when Feix discovered that a group of his men escaped to the woods, taking along their weapons. They were led by a recent

<sup>23</sup> According to the British historian, Martin Gilbert, several million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered by the Nazis. "Holocaust", p. 82.



arrival, a handsome, tall Ukrainian, or possibly a Russian, whose name was not yet known in the camp. Feix was furious. He immediately organized a search for the rebels.

I do not know how successful he was, although the whole camp rooted for the escapees. Anyway, the morning after the escape I was summoned by an SS-man, whom I never saw in the camp before. It occurred to me that, not trusting his Ukrainians, Feix probably summoned SS help from elsewhere. I followed the SS-man, ~~XXXXXX~~ puzzled and a little worried. What is happening? Why does this SS-man need a "Sanitaeter"?

We soon entered a seemingly empty brick building, one of a row of buildings behind our hospital, never seen by me before. On the floor of one of the ~~rooms~~ rooms lay a dead uniformed Ukrainian. I assumed that he was one of the escapees. If he was a rebel, then he was on our side. I felt sorry for yet another wasted life.

The SS-man muttered something about these Ukrainian pigs, who get all the loot from the Jews, while he, the German master, must live on his pay. He ordered me to check the man's pockets. They were empty. He ordered me to remove a gold ring from the dead man's index finger. He was loath to touch the Slavic underling's body. So that was the reason for my presence here. I was dismissed, to my great relief.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of that particular incident. As was usual at such setbacks for the "Master Race", the Jews were condemned to suffer the consequences. At the next morning's roll-call, Feix picked at random five innocent inmates who were immediately executed in front of all assembled inmates. Why Jews had to pay with their lives for the "transgressions" of others, will forever remain a cruel mystery. But those were



the facts.

There was one unpleasant episode, involving Otto and his gang which was not violent. At the height of the typhus epidemic, a patient was getting ready to be released. I sent an orderly down to the basement, where all our patients' clothing was stored, to retrieve the man's effects. The orderly came back, empty handed, announcing that all those lice infested garments were missing. As there was no other explanation, we had to conclude that Otto's people, who were assigned by Feix to guard the hospital twenty-four hours a day, cleared out the basement, and probably sold the wretched stuff to the local peasants, thereby possibly spreading typhus into the countryside. Since, at that time, the epidemic was still being reported to Feix as "Grippe", in our own interest we had to keep mum about the theft. Luckily, we were able to procure garment replacements for all our patients, from Schubert's warehouse, through unofficial channels, and Otto got away with his misdeed, undisturbed.

While all this was going on, I discovered in camp another Arbuz. I was talking to some people from Lublin, and, on hearing that I was born there, they introduced me to a young woman, whose maiden name was the same as mine. Arbuz is quite an uncommon name, so, not surprisingly, we found ourselves distantly related. (After the war, other members of her family were involved in a painful for me experience. I shall get back to that later. The young woman and her husband, somehow survived the war and went to Israel to live.)

Two more German-Jewish physicians were brought to Budzyn. Dr. Hans Arnt, a native of Berlin, was a mousy, pedantic, quite unpleasant individual. We heard that he was a prominent practitioner in his native city. The other, dr. Erich Mossbach, a heavy



set man, whose red, apoplectic face resembled one of those mean spirited Prussians, seen in the George Grosz drawings. Dr. Mosbach brought with him his "Aryan" wife, which was new for Budzyn, and his adopted daughter Eva. She was tall, rather good looking, and in her late twenties. My prejudice against the doctor was not unjustified; we heard that he came armed with a letter of recommendation from a high SS officer, an unusual and ominous case. His arrogant, overbearing behavior was too much for most of us, and we tried to stay out of his way as much as possible. From the start it became obvious that dr. Mosbach intended to replace our beloved dr. Foerster as chief physician at Budzyn. Not surprisingly, dr. Mosbach became a great favorite of the camp administration, particularly after Feix departed.

I already indicated that from time to time small groups of Jews were brought to Budzyn by the SS. Sometimes even single individuals would appear. Each of these people had a tragic story to tell. One of the saddest cases, as I recall, concerned a young woman, who reported to the Germans out of desperation. The poor woman was hiding out somewhere in the countryside, under a pigsty, and her life there can only be imagined. Her entire skin was covered with sores and boils, and her health was deteriorating. Her decision to surrender to the Nazis was not taken lightly. She just could not go on any longer in her hideout, and she decided to share the fate of her fellow Jews in the camp. That person's case was rather unusual, but not rare, and it revealed the full horror of the Jewish dilemma. I do not know what her later fate was, but I just hope that she lived to see liberation.

#### Remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto

In late June 1943 a most important, large transport arrived



from Warsaw, by way of Majdanek. From that remnant of Warsaw's Jewry we learned for the first time of the ghetto uprising, which occurred two months earlier.

No fewer than seven physicians, most of them associated with the renowned Czyste hospital, arrived with the group. One of the most prominent among them was Dr. David Wdowinski, chief of the psychiatry department at Czyste.<sup>24</sup> Others were Drs. Fajnsztajn, Fenigstein, one of the few survivors of the remarkable study of hunger as a disease at Czyste, Gliniewiecki, Pupko, Jakubowski and Tylbor.

Dr. Pupko, a physician very popular with orthodox patients in prewar Poland, arrived with a fractured leg, a fact that did not escape Feix's sharp eyes. Friends managed to hide Dr. Pupko for a few days, but eventually he was hunted down by Feix and mercilessly killed.

The other doctors were luckier. Our Dr. Foerster, as quickly as he could, set out to incorporate all physicians, regardless of their specialty, into the Revier staff. Since we had on the medical staff, in addition to Dr. Foerster, also Drs. Mossbach, Arnt, and Loewestein, a graduate of a French medical school, (who arrived some time earlier), we had now a total of ten physicians, not counting two dentists. A rather large medical crew for a smallish camp.

Our nursing staff was also enlarged by the arrival of Hanka, a professional nurse from Czyste. Dr. Foerster literally

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. Wdowinski led a separate group of Irgun fighters in the uprising. After liberation he joined the clandestine Irgun in Palestine. Deported by the British, before Israel was created, he came to New York, and joined the faculty at the New School. He died in 1970. (See expanded note, next page.)



<sup>25</sup> Dr. David Wdowinski was in prewar Poland the leader of the rightwing followers of Jabotinsky, known as Zionists- Revisionists later renamed Likud. In the Warsaw Ghetto uprising Wdowinski led a separate group of Irgun fighters. After liberation, and before the Jewish state was declared there, he was deported by the British from Palestine for his underground activities. He came to New York, and taught at the New School for Social Research, (Now known as New School University), and died in 1970.



saved the lives of these people. By being exempted from the grueling work at the factory they were able to maintain their physical well being for a while longer. (In fact, all of Budzyn doctors survived. Most of them settled in North America, dr. Loewenstein returned to Paris. *Drs. Beck and Foerster returned to Vienna.*)

Among the Warsaw newcomers was a certain Mr. Dua, whose life crossed mine for a short period, some years back. In 1936 I worked briefly in a shop that manufactured plastic eye glass frames. Mr. Dua was then the coowner of the shop, and the skilled designer and builder of most of the equipment used in ~~in~~ the shop. I enjoyed working there because the working conditions were quite remarkable. The crew worked eight hours a day, with proper rest breaks and decent salaries, a rarity at that time. Unfortunately, the militant chemical workers union, a clandestine, underground organization, foolishly decided to call a strike for better wages for the senior employees. The workers were ordered to occupy the shop. For the next several days food was delivered to us in baskets, which we had to pull up by ropes to the upper floor, where we were ensconced. I was young and this was an exciting action. But the end of the strike was predictable. After seven days of the sit-in, the owners called the police and we were evicted. All workers were replaced, and I lost a decent job.

Mr. Dua did not recognize me at Budzyn, and I had no desire to stir up unpleasant memories. Eventually ~~Mr.~~ Dua became ill with edema and was admitted to the Revier. He died soon after, a victim of starvation. I was at his bedside often, but I never revealed to the unfortunate man that I was once his evicted worker. I preferred to keep that knowledge to myself.

Another of the Varsovians was a certain Mr. Schulz, who owned a well known restaurant at the corner of Karmelicka and Nowolipki,



across from Weingart's drugstore, where I worked before the war. Shulz's restaurant was, at one time, the scene of a notorious Nazi propaganda film. The Germans forced Mr. Shulz to serve a luxurious meal to a large group of Jews, that scene was then contrasted with film shots of people starving on the street outside. Mr. Shulz, who never knew hunger before, died of starvation at the Budzyn hospital.

I was very eager to hear from the survivors of the Uprising about the fate of others in the ghetto. Their story of the mass deportations of people to Treblinka and other death camps was devastating. I concluded, with despair, that these deportations probably swallowed up my family and friends. Still, I did not give up hope.

The Ukrainians were very brutal with the Warsaw "bandits", probably on Feix's orders, and that hard-trying group suffered greatly, until the time, several months later, when it became completely integrated with the rest of the inmates.

About that time a sign went up on the barrack facing the gate: "Jedem das seine. SS." (To each his own.), which Feix ordered one of our artists to produce. The meaning of that sign, while understood, was not very clear to us.

#### After Feix

Suddenly, great news: Feix is leaving. (According to information I recently received, Feix was transferred to Yugoslavia, near Trieste, where he was killed by Tito's partisans. His son committed suicide a few years ago.) The whole camp was ordered to assemble at the roll-call area. There Feix delivered a rumbling speech, in which he announced that he was going to fight at the Eastern front, where his chance for survival were very slim... "You Jews, however, have an excellent chance to survive." This was a most unusual message, from an unusual source. I said to myself: "Good riddance, Reinhold!" Some people were already worrying about his successor. What kind



of monster would we have to face next?

A gendarme, Mohr, who for some time functioned as Feix's deputy, took over the running of the camp. A cold, cruel antisemite, Mohr wore the distinctive blue uniform of the German police.

One case I recall most distinctly from his "reign" concerned a German Jew, Bauchwitz, who was a recipient of the Iron Cross for his service in W.W.I. Apparently he broke some minor rule and Mohr decided to hang him for his "crime." Bauchwitz pleaded with Mohr to be executed by shooting, as befits an officer. Mohr was unmoved. His cruel response was: "Du bist ein Jude, und du musst wie ein Hund <sup>a</sup>sterben!" (You are a Jew, so you must die like<sup>a</sup> dog!)

Bauchwitz was publicly executed at the gallows and all inmates were forced to look on. I was spared the sight by keeping busy at the Revier.

His rule was short. After him there was a quick succession of camp commanders. Obersturmfuehrer Heitmeier was next. Then came Axman, Tauscher, after him Franz, and the order is blurred: Leipold, Bendler, Kleist, Gross. The quick change of our masters was probably connected with the changing fortunes of the German army on the Eastern front.

During Axman's rule a new, large group of Jews arrived from the town of Hrubieszow. Among them was another physician, Dr. Fred Ornstein. By joining the medical staff, his arrival increased the number of doctors to eleven. Dr. Ornstein, a tall, handsome man, came along with his three brothers and a pretty young sister, Hanka. (The youngest of the brothers, Henry, became later a rather successful toy manufacturer in the U.S.)

Hanka's friend Irka, a tall redhead, was an appealing, intelligent young woman, with whom I enjoyed an occasional conversation. Amid the horrors around us, life had to assert itself with some semblance of normalcy. She came to the hospital, when she knew



I was on duty. Somehow she was always able to convince the guard at the gate that she is going to the hospital on "legitimate" business. But both of us knew that she is taking risks. The last time she arrived crying. The guard on duty at the gate did not like her frequent visits to the hospital and beat her up. He also warned her to cease those visits. As much as I enjoyed her company at the often lonely Revier, especially now, with the Feix menace gone, I had to advise her to give up the visits, for her own sake. (Irka Obercyger did not survive. In January 1945, just before the Soviet army arrived, she was driven, along with Hanka Ornstein, Hanka, our nurse from Czyste, and thousands of other women from the Stuthof camp to the Baltic sea, where those who survived the bitter cold were murdered by the SS.)

#### SS General Globocnigg Visits the Revier

Dr. Foerster was notified that the notorious SS-Ober-Gruppenfuehrer (General) Odilo Globocnigg was planning to come to Budzyn for an inspection. He was in charge of the SS and the Gestapo in the Lublin area, and, as it came out later, one of the Nazis involved in planning of the "Final Solution." Dr. Foerster told<sup>us</sup> in confidence that Globocnigg was well known in Vienna as a common thug.<sup>25</sup>

Fresh linen and decent blankets were issued for the Revier, The floors of the hospital wards were scrubbed by our orderlies and sprinkled with saw-dust. The patients were freshly washed and dressed in clean nightshirts. On the assigned day our staff, with doctor Foerster in charge, lined up at the open door of the facility. Nervously we awaited the arrival of the "great" man.

Finally a group of leather-coated Gestapo men appeared



25 SS general Globocnigg, who supervised the 1943 massacre in /the Lublin are camps, known infamously as the "Harvest Festival", reported directly to Himmler.

Late in the war, Globocnigg was transferred to Trieste. Captured by the the Brititish, he committed suicide in May 1945. Encyclopedia of the Hilocaust, Yisrael Gutman, 1995

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with Globocnigg, a man with a bloated, unpleasant face, in front. They glanced inside the door and decided, after a brief conversation, not to enter, just in case a Jewish disease might infect them. Thus ended the visit of the prominent Nazi, one "letdown" we did not mind.

### The Messenger

To this day, when I think of the next extraordinary event that occurred at Budzyn, I have to question my memory. Did it really happen? The event was a brief appearance in our camp of a gentile woman. The questioning of my memory has to do with our state of mind during the war. People in the camps were so isolated from the outside world, most of us concluded that the world completely abandoned us. That perception was largely justified by our experience. Hence the questioning of an exceptional case.

But it really happened. A young Polish woman, a brave soul, smuggled herself in into the camp, I assume, with the workers return<sup>g</sup>ing from the factory. She brought with her letters and messages to some inmates from Jews in another camp in the area, known as Poniatowa. At the time I did not know much about the place, but years later I was able to piece together some facts about Poniatowa, from talks with survivors of that camp, and the available literature.

Well before the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, thousands of Warsaw Jews were brought to two camps-Trawniki and Poniatowa. Two German entrepreneurs, Toebbens and Schultz, well known in Warsaw Ghetto, where they run several large shops, manufacturing supplies for the Wehrmacht, organized these two camps, with the help of the SS.



From the Warsaw people I have heard previously that my former boss, Joseph Weingart, was persuaded by Herr Toebbens to transfer his large drugstore to Poniatowa. His only daughter, Ziuta, who had an opportunity to live on the Aryan side, (this I found out much later) opted to share her parents' fate and moved with them. My dear friend Bronka went also with them.

I spoke to the mysterious messenger and she agreed to take my message to Bronka. Very excited, I wrote a brief note, which I gave to the woman before she left. She promised to be back in a few weeks.

A couple of weeks later she did come back with several letters, one addressed to me. I was thrilled. The extraordinary bravery of that Christian woman is hard to imagine. She risked her life for strangers, and never asked for money. At the time I believed that her travels between the two camps were organized by somebody who had bigger things in mind, perhaps resistance or escape.<sup>24</sup>

Bronka's message troubled me deeply. After expressing joy at finding me at Budzyn, she proposed, pointblank, that I escape from Budzyn, and join her in the woods around Poniatowa.

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<sup>26</sup> Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, a Polish historian honored by Yad Vashem as a "Righteous Gentile", in his book: "The Samaritans" (Twayne Publishers, N.Y. 1970) while discussing the activities of *Żegota*, the Polish Council for Aid to Jews, states that couriers of the Council often reached large groups of Jews, "...including even the large Jewish camps...in Poniatowa and Trawniki." (page 29) Also, Teresa Prekerowa, a member of that Council, specifically mentions Budzyn as a camp reached by their courier, in her essay "The Relief Council for Jews in Poland, 1942-1945." (In "Jews of Poland", edited by Chimen Abramsky, et al., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p.172)



I was very apprehensive about such plans, knowing that the chances of survival under such conditions were very dubious at best. I also remembered the fate of the previous escapees, and, while I longed to be with Bronka, reason counseled against rash decision. I informed Bronka that I will consider her proposal, but I must have more time. My hope was that conditions might change for the better. Maybe an opportunity will come about. I spent many sleepless nights, brooding about this impossible situation.

Meanwhile, toward the middle of October 1943, the people in the camp became aware of unusual goings-on. Normally our barracks were left open during the night, so that people could go to the latrine, with guards' permission. Suddenly the guards changed the routine, and began to close the barracks each night. Heavy wooden crossbeams were placed on the outside of the doors, and additional guards were dispatched to patrol the perimeter of the camp. We sensed that something ominous was about to happen.

Amid the tension engendered by this new situation, a work commando of our people was dispatched by truck to Poniatowa. In the evening of that bleak day, in the second week of November, they returned, bringing with them food, clothing, and other items. They also brought with them a tale of horror. Everywhere in the camp they saw bloody clothing and things strewn about, unmistakable signs of a massacre. Poniatowa was no more.

Rumors spread that all the camps in the Lublin area were being liquidated. Now it became clear why our barracks were locked up for the night. Our camp was a branch of Majdanek, and was included in the list of camps to<sup>be</sup> liquidated. But, unknown to us, the managers of Heinkel Werke, quite influential with the SS, were able to persuade them that our people were essential for the German war effort, and they left us alone for the time being.



We were spared.<sup>27</sup> But for how long?

Our anxiety and tension reached the breaking point. All of us were quite aware that each day could bring our end. Yet, our determination to live did not diminish. There were no mental breakdowns, no suicides were committed. For me personally, the Poniatowa massacre meant the loss of my dearest friend. Still, deep down I was somehow hoping against hope that Bronka did manage to win her freedom by escaping, as she planned. (In fact, she did survive. See pp. 213-214)

### Budzyn Continues

Obersturmfuehrer Tauscher was an efficient German. He kept a tight discipline in the camp, and was merciless with the most minute breaches of that discipline. but then mercy was not a part of the Nazi vocabulary anyway. Once he caught a youngster who stole a few potatoes. Declaring to the assembled inmates that, if "...all Jews were to steal an equal number of potatoes, Germany would be that much poorer," he shot the unfortunate boy.

(Several years ago I was summoned to the German consulate in New York to testify about Tauscher, who was under arrest in West Germany. I do not know the outcome of his case.)

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<sup>27</sup> According to Martin Gilbert, in a massacre the Germans code named "Harvest Festival", all Jews in Majdanek, Poniatowa and Trawniki were murdered on the first week of November 43.

Five thousand former Pow's were brought from the camp at Lipowa street in Lublin, to Majdanek and slaughtered on November 2. According to Gilbert, only one camp survived the "Harvest Festival", and that was Budzyn. (The Holocaust, pp 627-8 )



Another time the SS discovered that one of three brothers, natives of Krasnik, was missing. Tauscher ordered the two brothers left behind and a brother-in-law to stand at the assembly place for another hour. When that hour elapsed, and the missing brother was not found, the Obersturmfuehrer very calmly sentenced the three innocent people to die. Bydzewski, the always immaculately dressed and polished SS underling, and the "Volksdeutsche" Otto, the brutish, foul mouthed little monster, did the dirty work.

We got word that there would be a "selection" (an euphemism for selecting people to die) among our patients. Dr. Foerster and our staff, without wasting any time, quickly prepared a list of people able to go back to the barracks, and they were immediately released. The rest, about thirty five patients, were too far gone to be able to function on their own.

Next morning Sharfuehrer Teufel (the devil in German-his real name!) marched up to the hospital with a squad of Ukrainians. ~~XXXXXX~~ "Alle Kranke raus!" they yelled. (All sick people out!) Although we expected that calamity, still it was hard to take. Teufel explicitly forbade us to dress the victims. We knew what that meant.

Those people, doomed to die within the next hour perhaps, were only dimly aware of that inevitability. Their behavior at that fatal moment was irrational and bizarre. Instead of trying to save themselves, they fought over bits of food, some wretched potatoes or stale bread. The need to satisfy their perpetual hunger so overwhelmed these people that nothing else mattered any more. Having brought these victims to that terrible condition, the SSmen looked on with amused satisfaction. The scene only confirmed once again their views about Jews as "subhumans."

Among the "selected" people that morning was a man from



Warsaw, by the name of Hamburger. This Hamburger claimed to have known my mother. He told me that the last time he saw her was during the uprising; a house on Mila street, where she allegedly lived at the time, was on fire. He saw my mother, who was at that time in her late fifties, climbing down from an upper story, holding on to the waste pipes, as there was no staircase left. He then lost sight of her. Naturally, I was shaken by his story. (While I believed the man's story at that time, its veracity was questioned years later by friends who knew my family. They were sure that my whole family was deported to Treblinka during the mass deportations from Warsaw in 1942.)

And now I was destined to help this man on his last journey. At a nearby siding, three railroad cars, their floors covered with straw, were ready to receive their "passengers." The hospital staff was ordered to assist the weaker patients. We were forced to help the executioners in their dirty work, but there was no choice in this matter. While our group gathered at the siding, another, larger group of about 125-130 elderly, or emaciated people arrived at the site. They were pulled out that morning from the columns marching to work. Finally, greatly relieved, our staff was told to go back to the hospital, now completely empty.

To compensate for their "loss," the Germans later that day brought to Budzyn a transport of Soviet Jews from Minsk. A very intelligent young man, Lova Schulkin, who arrived with that transport, later joined my circle of close friends. (Last time I heard of him, he was in Israel.)

By this time it became clear that whenever the Nazis eliminated one group of people, they often replaced their self-inflicted losses with other Jews, from at that time still unlimited pool of captive people. Also, whenever they could, they preferred



to import people from other countries as replacements. It served their purposes well.

### More Victims

For some time now some of us noticed that the Ukrainians' behavior changed for the worse. They were obviously tense and jittery. Perhaps they expected something to develop. Or maybe there were some reverses on the Russian front. In any case, their unease affected our own state of mind, never at ease anyway. We were preparing ourselves for another calamity. For our guards only a pretext was needed.

That pretext was provided one night by two brothers from Hrubieszow, who, deciding to escape, cut the barbed wire just behind the latrine. Since the latrine was very close to the fence, that spot was the least visible to the guards. But the would be escapees were somehow spotted anyway. The watchtower guards opened fire and machine gunned the entire perimeter of the latrine. A terrible massacre resulted. More than thirty people were mowed down, some inside the latrine, others on the way to it. And the two brothers who started it all. The temperature that night was low, and by the next morning, when our people were permitted to collect the bodies, the dead were frozen stiff.

I distinctly remember when the shooting started. Most of our staff was preparing to retire for the night, and when the first shots were heard, we thought that our end is near. We all dropped to the floor and stayed there for about ten long minutes. When finally all became quiet, we laid down in our bunks, but few slept that night.

In subdued tones we conversed, trying to guess what caused the machine gun fire. The unwelcome morning finally came and we prepared ourselves for the worst. A few victims survived and were brought to the infirmary. They were half frozen. I could only imagine, if one could,



the nightmare these survivors went through, while lying there, on that frozen, filthy ground, all night.

Our nurse from Warsaw, Hanka, suffered a heavy blow that night; her closest friend was among the dead. She was hysterical and nothing we said to her was of any use. She remained numb for days.

The victims were buried in a mass grave, at the usual place.

From the period of Obersturmfuehrer Franz's "reign" at Bydzyń, the most memorable event was his unexpected visit, one afternoon, at our dispensary. He was in a gloomy mood. (Another of their reverses?) Franz, a stereotypical German officer, well dressed and polished, barked an order: "Alle antreten!" (All line-up) We expected trouble, when the grim-visaged SS officer began to pace, back and forth, in front of us. He carried in his left hand a submachine gun; tucked into his belt was a hand grenade. That grenade, a highly menacing weapon, which we normally did not see in the camp, resembled a mallet, with the head mounted upright on the longish, wooden handle.

None of us was aware of the reason for his anger. We managed to maintain our composure, but I knew that something had to give. Finally he stopped in front of Fred Ornstein, the tall, personable physician from Hrubieszów, who was standing on my right. He addressed the doctor, in a mocking voice: "Sie waren in der Polnischer Armee, nicht war?" (You were in the Polish Army, right?) After Dr. Ornstein answered: "Ja" (yes), Franz removed the hand grenade from his belt and hit the doctor across the neck. He then moved in front of me and hit me the same way. We feared that the grenade might explode in his hand. It did not. His anger dissipated, Franz left the room. Our group quickly dispersed, relieved that nothing



of consequence has happened. Elementary common sense should have told us that Franz was not about to commit suicide. But under these circumstances who could think clearly?

Another group of Jews, 85 strong, was brought to Budzyn. They were actually a remnant of a larger camp, that was liquidated under most unusual circumstances. Used, as I was, to uncommon events unfolding daily, I was still able to marvel at the variety of human experience and to empathize with the suffering that people were forced to endure. From a young fellow who was admitted to the hospital with a badly burned leg, I was able to hear a first hand account of the events at that camp, the name of which I unfortunately don't recall.

Their camp was under the command of a particularly vicious SS man. Because a strong Jewish partizan group operated in the vicinity, a call went out to them for help. One night they struck. The hated camp commandant and most of the guards were executed. The others run away in panic. The able bodied men and women joined the partizans and escaped to the woods. The others, unable, or unwilling to follow, stayed on, awaiting the return of the Germans, a decision which is not easy to understand, unless one was there.

Determined to make most of their temporary freedom, the remnants broke into the warehouse, where the food was kept, and had a veritable orgy of eating and drinking all night long. In the general confusion, ~~over~~ young man fell or was pushed into a boiling cauldron of coffee. His leg was badly burned. The skin of his right leg was completely destroyed. Luckily, we had some sort of a bandage saturated with a sulfa powder, which I applied to his leg. Then he told me their story.

"The next day the SS returned," my patient continued. By



some miracle, they did not kill the sorry remnant, but instead brought them to Budzyn. The young man was lucky; under Feix he would <sup>not</sup> have had a chance.

I had the trying task to change the patient's dressing every second day. The sight and the smell of his wound was dreadful, but somehow, after two weeks of the sulfa treatment his <sup>leg</sup> began to heal. I was very happy for him.

Among the new people was another dentist, doctor Fanto, a heavy set, middle aged, intelligent man, and his very young son, Ephraim. (Ephraim survived, and one day I received in New York a letter from him from Israel, with a photo of the proud young man in the uniform of the Israeli army. The photo gave me great pleasure.)

Sometime in January 1944, there came a very strange announcement: all scientists, mathematicians and chemists, should register immediately for a special assignment. Several of my friends and acquaintances registered, in the hope of improving their lot. There was no visible change for these people for a while, but there was a lot of speculation about the meaning of that unusual recruitment.

#### The New Camp

That winter rumors spread that a resistance group was forming in the camp, and even acquiring weapons. The source of the weapons was, allegedly, an anti-Nazi Feldfebel of the Wehrmacht, who maintained contact with some inmates.

I recall from that period a quarrel between a German non-com and an SS-officer. Soldiers of the regular army often displayed contempt for the SS, accusing them of avoiding front-line duty. One of the expressions used by that soldier, in taunting the angry SS-man, (only a soldier could get away with that) was "Synagogenheld" (Synagogue hero). I wondered if this was the very



same soldier who provided the weapons for the resistance group.

The attempt at resistance was cut short by a new, rather odd decision by the Lublin Gestapo-SS headquarters, to relocate us to another camp, to be built about a mile away from our place. The new place was to have an electrified, barbed wire fence, and was to be known as "KL Majdanek, Nebenlager Budzyn". (C.C. Majdanek, Budzyn Branch) The old camp was "merely" a "Zwangsarbeitslager", or Forced Labor Camp.<sup>28</sup>

Some of us tried to speculate on the reasons for this irrational, as it seemed to us, decision. But we did not get far in our reasoning, so we gave up and braced ourselves for the new hardships.

The dreaded day came on February first, 1944. All inmates, without exceptions, were ordered to strip and keep only our belts and shoes. All other items were to be surrendered to the SS. Most of us still kept some small mementoes, photos, letters and most importantly, our personal documents. Now the time came to give it all up. The Germans were going to deprive us of our last link to the outside world, and we could do nothing to prevent it.

I was stoically preparing myself for this latest calamity. I still had my papers, many photos, which so amused Feix shortly before he decided to do away with me, and my cherished Red Cross premature death notice. I knew that I shall never see these precious items again, should I surrender them to the cursed SS. I decided to destroy them all. With a heavy heart, and a feeling that our dehumanization is being completed by the German decree, I ripped up all the papers and photos, and disposed of them, when nobody was around.

Stripped of our civilian clothing, we received,

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<sup>28</sup> Officially Budzyn became a branch of Majdanek on 10/22/43.



for the first time, striped , pajama-like uniforms, which were adorned with red triangles over the left chest pocket.<sup>29</sup> Each of us was assigned a KL number.

I was wondering about our designation as politicals, but soon an explanation of sorts came. During the transfer procedures, one of the SS officers casually remarked, and do not know if he meant it, or was it just one of the Nazi "jokes", that the so called "Juden Frage" (Jewish Question) was already solved. From now on, we, the remnants, are just political prisoners. That could have only one meaning: they destroyed almost all European Jews, and could now afford to forget about the small groups of surviving Jews, living in some scattered camps. Later events proved that even the last remnants were not safe.

Only able bodied men and women were transferred to the new place. All others were removed to an unknown place, about which we had no illusions.

Life in the new environment, behind a double row of electrified wires, was much harsher, but at least the daily atrocities and executions ceased almost completely. It could well be that the nearing Eastern front gave the SS second thoughts.

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<sup>29</sup> These triangles, devised by the SS to classify various types of prisoners, utilized various colors. Thus, a red triangle was for politicals, green for criminals, pink for homosexuals, brown for gypsies, purple for Jehova's Witnesses.



We settled down to a "normal" routine. The work commandos marched off to the Heinkel factory, under the command of the group elders, while the sick and the disabled lined up at the infirmary for medical attention. When my turn came to be on duty, I could observe how much further the health of these individuals deteriorated. I tried to concentrate on the task at hand, as the only way to cope with our trying assignment. Our people were simply wasting away, and our means to help them were so circumscribed.

The German sanctioned method was to issue to the worst cases a paper slip known popularly as "Schonung" (spare or rest), entitling the bearer to two or three days of staying away from work. In hopeless cases the inmate was admitted to the hospital, not a regular barrack with four tiered bunks. Since our move to the new place, the brick building, with all its modern conveniences, was off limits to us.

Sometimes in March of 44, unexpectedly the now famous "scientists" were summoned to the camp office, and ordered to prepare for departure. They left the same day, on a truck guarded by the SS. In the group were the four Ornstein brothers, who left behind their sister Hanka, a person too young to be believable as a scientist.<sup>30</sup>

Before Passover of that year rumors spread in the camp that a "plot" to bake matzos was uncovered by the authorities. It seems that a rabbi from Warsaw, Sztokhamer, conceived of the idea to smuggle into the camp a quantity of flour and bake the matzos in the Heinkel Werke disinfection ovens! The unfortunate rabbi was caught in the act and severely beaten. While most of the inmates would have loved to be able to celebrate Passover in the traditional way, the idea of clandestinely baking matzos in, of all places, an oven of

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<sup>30</sup> What happened subsequently to that curious group is related in the book I Shall Live, written by the youngest of the Ornstein brothers, Henry. (Beaufort Books, N.Y. 1987)



a German factory was quite strange, possibly even endangering human life. Saving human life should have been more important than consuming traditional food, even from a strictly religious point of view. Anyway, matzos had to wait for a better day. <sup>31</sup>

#### Mielec - a Branch of K.L. Plaszow

Time moved on. Toward the spring of 1944, several hundred of our people were unexpectedly removed from Budzyn, and sent to another camp. At Mielec, a branch of the concentration camp Plaszow, near Cracow, inmates worked at another Heinkel Werke facility. A prewar Polish airplane factory, it now produced plane parts for the German Luftwaffe.

The insufferable dr. Mossbach, who tried very hard to take over the Revier from the moment he arrived at Budzyn, saw an opportunity when the Mielec group was formed. <sup>There were unconfirmed reports that</sup> Through his SS connections he arranged to send our beloved doctor Foerster with them. Our staff was outraged, but there was little we could do. When, in April of that year, the Germans asked for volunteers to be transferred to Mielec, I applied without hesitation. Normally I adhered to the principle never to volunteer, lest I might regret it later, but I was unhappy to have to work for Mossbach, and most of my friends were there already anyway. On the 24th of that month our volunteer group was on its way to Mielec by trucks.

The new camp was like a journey back in time. I found myself again in a forced labor camp, where the inmates still wore their civilian clothing. Since they worked in the factory along with German and Polish civilians, the SS devised a simple method to identify Jews from the camp. All inmates had to have a strip of hair, about two inches wide, from the forehead to the rear of the neck, cut short by the camp barbers. The slave laborers, with a sense of humor still sharp, dubbed this strip



34 In his introduction to the second edition of Dr. David Wdowinski's book: And We are not Saved, Philosophical Library, N.Y., 1985, Morris Chariton writes: "In the concentration camp at Budzin (sic!) Dr. Wdowinski ...on Passover eve, 1994...proposed baking matzot, and together with Rabbis Shapiro and Shtokhamer, drew up a plan of action. Were it not for its success, the two rabbis would have died of hunger." This story sounds strange to me. What about the stricture in Judaism that saving a human life is the most important value? (I.A.)



the Läuse Allee (lice boulevard).

The commandant of the camp at the time was a fat Hauptscharführer, Schwamberger,<sup>32</sup> whose constant companion was Prinz, an German shepherd. Normally docile, this dog could be quite vicious, when commanded by his master.

Two brothers Friedman, from the town of Mielec, were very influential in the camp. Heniek (a variant of Henryk-Henry), an arrogant sort, commanded the orderlies, while his amiable sibling, Josek (Joseph), a former butcher, was in charge of the kitchen. His son Nolek (Norbert), was a fine, handsome young man, whom I came to like a lot. (Nolek-Norbert survived and lives on Long Island)

Here again I got an assignment to work in the "Krankenstube" (Infirmary) under Dr. Foerster, who was very happy to have his former assistant back, and a local physician, whose name I can not recall. Our infirmary was very rudimentary here, but we managed somehow. Mr. Korman, our pharmacist also arrived from Budzyn, and I shared a bunk with him.

Hanka Ornstein and Irka Obercyger, who arrived in Mielec with the first group, felt somewhat lost in the new environment, separated from their families and friends. I tried to help them as much as I could. I recall that once Hanka asked for assistance. Her problem was that she wanted to remove some gold coins hidden in one of her shoes under a heel, but there was no privy anywhere in the camp. The only place available was my little room, which I shared with the pharmacist. I let Hanka in, while I stood watch outside until she was able to retrieve her life saving coins. Needless to say, this was a dangerous operation. Hiding valuables was punished by instant death.

One of the more memorable incidents of that Mielec period

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<sup>32</sup> In 1987 Schwamberger was arrested in Argentina, and extradited to Germany, where, in May of 1992 he was sentenced to life in prison for his war crimes. (per New York Times of 5/19/92)



occurred when Dolek Zuckerbrot, a decent and clever young man, got in trouble with the Hauptscharfuehrer. Schwamberger ordered Prinz to attack Dolek. When the dog started to jump around the victim, attempting to bite him, Dolek had the "Chutzpah" to address the Prinz in German: "Prinz, why are you biting me? Don't you know that you are only a dog, ~~not~~ a human?" The commandant was, of course, outraged, and beat Dolek severely. Luckily, Dolek had a strong constitution and recovered.

Ironically, soon after our group's arrival, the SS began the work of converting the camp Mielec into "K.L. Plaszow, Abteilung Mielec," the very same process we experienced once before at Budzyn. Here however, because of lack of space, the camp was not moved; they merely built an electrified ~~XXXXX~~ inner fence, and additional watchtowers.

At this point an event occurred, which I dubbed ~~XXXXXXXX~~ "The dog Story." This is what happened: Unterscharfuehrer Klaus, who recently arrived, became the "Sanitäts Offizier" (Health Officer) which meant that he was my real boss. He was a young, blond, Nordic type, with a touch of humanity, rare, needless to say, in the SS. Just reassigned to Poland from the more advanced Holland, where he had a similar position in a Dutch concentration camp, he had wonders to tell about the modern facilities of that camp. The plumbing, the equipment, the ambiance... In short, nothing less than a paradise on earth... He had harsh words for this inferior, backward place called Mielec. He was particularly unhappy with our primitive infirmary. A strange fellow, this SS man.

One dark evening Klaus came running into the infirmary. I noticed that he was highly agitated. "Quickly, give me a syringe with Lobelin!" he ordered breathlessly. I rushed to fill a



glass syringe with Lobelin, a heart stimulant, which I extracted from a sealed glass ampule, and handed it to the impatient SSman. He rushed out into the night.

I began to wonder what happened. Did the commandant, the fat Nazi Schwamberger, have a heart attack? That would be good news, although one never knew what replacement we might get later.

Soon Klaus came back to return the syringe. He seemed greatly relieved. "Gott sei dank!" (Thank God!) he kept repeating. I did not dare to ask him what happened, but he volunteered the information anyway. Apparently Prinz, the commandant's "friendly" dog, run into the newly electrified fence and received a shock, from which he was just resuscitated by our able Unterscharfuehrer. What a pity! Remembering Dolek's case, and the suffering of others caused by that dog, I was disappointed that Klaus managed to revive the Nazi's fourlegged servant.

The poignant story does not end here. The same week rumors spread in the camp that the Germans, anxious to test the effectiveness of the electrified wires, took a prisoner from one of the barracks at night, and threw him against the fence. Whether their "test" was successful, it was impossible to find out. In any case the "decent" health officer Klaus never came to me for another syringe with Lobelin...

Schwamberger was soon replaced by another SS officer, Landsdorfer. This new commandant was very much concerned that Jews might try to sneak out with the civilian workers, and escape. For somebody determined enough, it was indeed possible to mingle with the civilian Poles, provided that they don't betray the person, and the "läuse Allee" could be covered with a cap. I wonder if the Germans knew of the difficulties an escapee faced, out



in the "free" world, having to depend on good will of mostly indifferent people, an important reason why relatively few people tried to escape

Landsdorfer opted for a tattoo "KL". It was rumored that he planned to put it on our foreheads, but thought better of it, or maybe somebody more "humane" persuaded him to change his mind. The tattoo was to be put on the right arm, just above the wrist.

Nobody informed me of this, but I was picked to be the initial guinea pig. An Ukrainian guard arrived at the infirmary and demanded to see my right forearm. He removed from a satchel something that looked like a stamp, with steel needles probably meant for a gramophone (in those days a crude steel needle was used to play records) forming the letters KL. He dipped this improvised stamp into an ink pad and forcefully applied this contraption to my forearm. It hurt quite a bit, but the result was negligible. There was a faint outline of the letters, with tiny droplets of ink mixed with blood. The Ukrainian examined his handiwork with a grin, and ordered me to wash the area off. The whole thing disappeared after that. He tried several times, each time using more force, with the same results. He cursed in Ukrainian.

As I mentioned previously, our pharmacist from Krasnik was with us at Mielec. This elderly, erudite individual, ably performed his modest duties of occasionally preparing some ointment, or powder for our patients. These preparations were ~~XXXXXXXX~~ compounded from his own supplies, brought from his defunct pharmacy. I used to see him often in the mornings, very carefully weighing some cereal, which he somehow procured from somewhere, on his precision apothecary scale, and then cook it on a little alcohol burner. He then ate it as a frugal supplement to the meager camp diet. A prudent man, he tried always to keep in the background.



Quite correctly, he felt to be safer that way.

This pharmacist was present when the Ukrainian was experimenting with my arm. After the guard left, I discussed the tattoo matter with him. He thought that, to avoid further unpleasant experiments with my arm, he would advise the Germans how to do it properly. He spoke to the Ukrainian and advised him to use two sewing needles, tied together with thread. One needle should be about a 32nd of an inch longer than the other, at the sharp end. As he explained it, the longer point pierces the skin, then the shorter tip introduces the ink.

The Ukrainian followed the recommendation, and I became the first inmate to obtain that dubious distinction of receiving the two letter tattoo, about one inch long, on my right forearm, which I have to this day, unchanged.

Following the "successful" operation, several Ukrainians got busy tattooing the other inmates at the infirmary. I must mention, for historical accuracy, that a few brave souls among the inmates tried to deceive the camp authorities by marking their skin with an indelible pencil, which they got hold of in the factory, in an attempt at avoiding the real thing. Whether they succeeded, I do not know.

During my brief stay at the Mielec camp I witnessed overflights of German rocketry. Somewhere in the vicinity of the camp, in an area known in Polish as Pustkow (Wasteland, or Emptiness) the German space scientists conducted tests of their rockets, which terrorized London and other British cities. Several times I saw these monstrous birds in flight, always accompanied by terrifying sonic booms. It was a disquieting, awesome sight.

#### Evacuation of the Mielec Camp

Around July 1944 the Soviet offensive came unexpectedly clo-



se to our area. The Germans were forced to retreat further West. Exactly three month after my arrival at Mielec, we were on the move again.

It is a matter of historical interest to note that, despite the severe shortages of rolling stock which the Germans sustained, due to losses at the front, and considerable damage inflicted by various partizan groups, active in the East, we, the Jewish prisoners were always the first to be evacuated. German civilians, various machinery and equipment were left for later. We should have been flattered and grateful for that meticulous attention the Nazis paid to our well being...

On July 24 of that year we found ourselves on a freight train moving West. On the next day we arrived, to our astonishment, at Wieliczka, a well known, thousand year old salt mine, located west of Cracow. To our great surprise and ~~XXXXXX~~ pleasure, we found here all our friends from Budzyn, which was evacuated earlier.

Wieliczka was an interesting example of German desperation, resulting from their reverses at the Eastern front. Against better judgment, they intalled, deep in the saltmine, sophisticated machinery to produce airplane parts, hoping thus to avoid heavy losses caused by Allied raids. Unfortunately for the Nazis, their ingenuity for hiding such targets from the Allied air force was in this case severely tested. In the heavily salt-saturated environment of the salt mine, all machinery was badly corroded and refused to function to Germans' satisfaction. They reluctantly had to move once more.

On August first, again squeezed into railroad cars, like so much freight, we headed further West. The next day, after we survived a most trying night attempting to sleep on the floor of the cars, our train was shunted to a siding. Through the barbed



wire encrusted tiny windows we could see women in striped garb, kerchiefs on their heads hiding shaven heads, working in the fields. The sign at the station said: Oswiecim. (Auschwitz) The name meant nothing to us on the train. The SS was very successful in keeping that terrible place a secret to most people, even at that late stage. It is probably just another camp, we thought.

I strongly believe that at that point the SS tried to make up their collective mind concerning our transport's fate, Maybe the Heinkel people were still influential, because we found ourselves on the move again. Once again I was about to leave Poland, to which I was returned only a short four years ago.

There ensued a subdued discussion in the cattle car, about our situation. Based on what we knew, we concluded that, while there were still good reasons to worry about our future, perhaps the worst was over for us. Logically we reasoned that if the Germans wanted to kill us, they would not<sup>have</sup> had to bother to transport us further West. It was essential for our sanity's sake, to believe that there was still a chance for us to survive the ordeal.

### New Experience

On August 4th, after many stops and reversals of direction, our transport of about three thousand men (women were separated from us at Wieliczka, as we discovered on disembarking, a tragedy for those who became separated from their wives and daughters) arrived at our destination, a forbidding place known as Flossenbourg.

K.L. Flossenbourg held prisoners from across Europe, but I believe that we were the first Jews to arrive there, and certainly the first East European Jews.

The camp held some very prominent prisoners, among them, according to rumors I heard in the place, Leon Blum, the former



French prime minister and a Jew, and admiral Horthy, the regent of Hungary. Our arrival at Flossenbourg occurred shortly after the ill fated attempt to assassinate Hitler, in which many German officers were implicated. Another rumor, probably based on true facts, was that a number of these officers were executed, in a most horrible fashion, at Flossenbourg. Allegedly the officers were packed in sacks, and thrown live into the burning crematoria.... Reading later about the brutal way the most prominent Wehrmacht officers were treated by the Nazi courts, I am inclined to believe the worst. (The bitter animosity of the Nazis <sup>and particularly the SS</sup> toward the Wehrmacht was of long standing.)

According to oldtimers in the camp, the facility was built mostly by gentile Polish prisoners, in a very difficult, rocky area, near the ruins of a medieval castle called Flossenbourg. Many of the prisoners succumbed to the hardships and cruel treatment. These oldtimers told me that the camp was literally paved with the blood, ~~XXXXX~~ sweat, and tears of these nameless victims.

I remained at Flossenbourg for only a short time, but that stay proved to be the most bizarre in my varied experience.

On arrival, our transport was ordered to assemble in a large area, probably the roll-call square. Doctor Foerster was carrying his black satchel, brimming with his medical instruments and supplies, while I, standing next to him, carried a knapsack, filled with medical supplies, saved from our dispensary at Mielec.

From an open window of a building, which apparently housed some sort of camp offices, we two were spotted by some German kapos. (Kapo was a name given to foremen or group leaders in the camps) They called us over, and ordered us to go to a room in the back, where they proceeded to go through our belongings.

The brutes immediately "confiscated" the doctor's gold tip-



ped fountain pen and a few other items of value, told us in no uncertain terms to leave our supplies with them, and declared that we are free to go.

Disturbed by the loss of our precious supplies, we returned to our group. ~~XXX~~ Unknown to us, while we were detained by the kapos, the people were ordered to strip naked. The pitiful garments and the shabby underwear were then dumped in a corner of the large square. The SS, in their "goodness" permitted the prisoners to retain their belts and shoes.

When doctor Foerster and I came out of the kapos' office, we received no orders from anybody. And so, it came to pass that a crowd of three thousand men, all naked, but shoed and belted, milled about on the square. In this odd assembly of naked bodies, two individuals, fully dressed, were dangerously exposed. Some of our friends noticed our predicament and tried to make jokes about our crazy situation, but we did not think it funny.

Doctor Foerster and I decided, as long as nobody ordered us otherwise, to keep our clothes on. Of course, at that point we did not know that this bizarre situation will stretch to fully seven days.

The nudists by coercion were lucky that this was August and the days were quite warm. People did not miss their clothing much, except in the evenings, when the place became quite chilly. Of course, as social beings, with their strongly developed sense of shame, people initially reacted in shock, when the order came, but after only a few hours, nobody paid any attention to the lack of clothing. Only the two of us, still fully dressed, were the object of curiosity for the others, quite a reversal of the usual social arrangements...

To this day it is not clear to me why the SS took away the



closing for a whole week, while the striped rags lay in the 155  
corner of the square all that time, untouched. After all a  
quarantine did not require that we stay naked all that time.  
Maybe it was just some type of Nazi joke. Toward the evening,  
as the chilly air arrived, people huddled and clung to each other,  
still forced to stay outdoors. In retrospect I know it was not  
a joke. Stripping inmates of their clothing was one of the means  
used by the SS to humiliate and control us better.

After a meager meal of a watery soup and a slice of bread  
we were finally permitted to retire for the night in the barracks.  
For two days the doctor and I mingled with the naked crowd, and  
strange to relate, I felt quite odd and uncomfortable. On the  
third day an SS officer came into the area and immediately noticed  
us two. "Verfluchte Juden!" he yelled. "Sofort ausziehen! Los!  
Los!" (Damn Jews! Undress immediately! Hurry! Hurry!) He did not  
even asked us why we two were dressed.

We undressed and tossed our clothing on the top of the heap.  
Both of us felt relieved. Maybe it was instinctive. We knew that  
it was safer in the camp not to stick out, to be like everybody  
else, to blend in. And so our relief was both genuine and psycho-  
logically explainable. Still, it was a rather strange experience.

#### The Number on my Forehead

On the sixth day of our ordeal the order came to line up in  
the big square. Chairs were set up, and camp barbers proceeded  
to cut everybody's body hair, on the scalp, underarms, and the  
pubic area. Then an elderly SS officer appeared on the square.  
Short, with watery eyes and a childlike expression on his face,  
he looked some kid in anticipation of a pleasurable experience.  
To me he appeared to suffer from an initial stage of senility.  
He turned out to be the camp SS physician, who came to "examine"  
us.



What happened next was rather unreal. Each of us had to climb up on a chair and stand stiffly on it, while the grotesque little man (In the German film "The Tin Drum", the dwarfish SS-officer reminded me of him) looked briefly at the human specimen with a dull eye. After a barked command: "Herunter!" (down!) one had to climb down; the doctor dipped a brush in some ink and painted a large number on the just "examined" inmate's forehead.

I received number 1, while my friend, doctor Foerster, got a 3. Since I was only 27 years old, and luckily, in fairly good shape, my number 1 could only be a good sign. Dr. Foerster's number 3 worried me a bit, but he had the advantage of being a physician. Although nobody bothered to explain to us the meaning of these numbers, we were experienced enough to know that they were important. They, no doubt, had something to do with our physical condition, and might even determine our fate in the coming days.

Still, the scene, in retrospect, was so surreal, the SS doctor (what number would he have gotten?), with his perpetual grin on the gnomish face so ridiculous, that, had we had the detachment I can afford now, we should have taken it for some outlandish joke, a black theater piece.

But Flossenburg was too awesome a place to think of jokes. We took it seriously. For the rest of the day the numbered, naked people walked about in groups, discussing, in great animation, the meaning of those ciphers.

On the morning of the seventh day they finally gave us some striped rags to cover our bodies. After a breakfast of the ubiquitous ~~SSA~~ ersatz coffee and a bit of bread, about five hundred of us were separated from the rest of the crowd and lined up in one corner of the field.



A small group of German civilians, all armed with briefcases, appeared in front of us, accompanied by several SS officers. They looked at us briefly, held an animated conversation with the officers and left. We assumed that they represented some civilian enterprise, and immediately dubbed them with the epithet: "slave dealers." We were to see them again in other camps, and from now on the warning would go out: "the slave dealers are here!"

#### A new Camp-a new Country

Our stay at Flossenburg was over. It was only one week, but what a week! I left ~~XXXXX~~ that place with the same feeling I had at all the previous departures: a certain relief that that particular phase is over, and a nagging anxiety concerning our next destination. Again they marched us to a railroad siding. I was distressed to realize that this time I became separated from doctor Foerster for good. (Doctor Foerster, despite his advanced age, and the bad number on his forehead, survived. I met him, after liberation, in a D.P. camp at Garmisch Panterkirchen.)

In the late evening of the same day, August 10, 1944, our group arrived at our destination, a camp in occupied Czechoslovakia, named Leitmeritz, after the nearby town, known in Czech as Litomerice. They brought us to a huge hall, formerly a riding school, which was to be our new home. The guards were now all SS; apparently the Ukrainians and other ethnics were not employed as guards outside Poland.

The well known ghetto of Theresistadt was located nearby. This we discovered when a few Jewish women from that place were once brought to Letmeritz for a brief stay, and we were able to talk to them.

Much has been said and written about Polish anti-Semitism,



not all of it necessarily fair. However, the behavior of the Polish kapos, who constituted the bulk of the supervisors at Leimeritz, confirmed the worst view of our compatriots. The moment that they found out that we were Polish Jews, they pounced on us with a ferocity which startled us.

After a fitful night's sleep, we were suddenly awakened very early next morning- it must have been not later than 4:30-5 o'clock, by terrifying yells: "Verfluchte Juden-loss, loss, aufstehen!" The yells were reinforced by wooden sticks the kapos used indiscriminately on the feet of the tardy.

A real pandemonium ensued. People scampered down from the wooden boards covered with strawsacks, and run to the large wash-room, to take care of their morning ablutions. Here for the first time I encountered the so called Turkish toilets--simply holes in the ~~XXXXX~~ concrete floor, with two raised platforms, in shape of soles. The user had to plant his or her feet on those platforms and to squat over the hole. Many of our people, unaccustomed to this difficult position, were unable to relieve themselves- an additional hardship, on top of the general disorientation and misery. Several SS men, armed with long leather whips, arrived on the scene. They ordered everybody to strip. We were led to an area where shower heads were visible in the ceiling. We were treated to a cold shower, to the accompaniment of screams of the inmates' ~~XXXXX~~, yells of the kapos hitting naked bodies with their sticks, and SS men lashing out with their whips, as if we were wild beasts in a ~~XXXXX~~ circus.

This torture finally over, we dressed quickly and lined up for the bitter ersatz coffee. A slice of bread with marmalade, made of beet, constituted our nourishment. After the usual roll call, most of the inmates marched off to work in a plant that pro-



duced Tiger tanks, the Wehrmacht's most formidable weapon. As a newcomer, I was held back, and a while later was assigned to a work commando working at a construction site.

My privileged job was to distribute tools - shovels, pick-axes, etc.-to the workers. After that uncomplicated job I was free except for the duty to guard the tool room, and at the end of the day I had to collect the tools from the workers.

But I was naive to believe that I got that easy job by sheer luck. I was young, healthy, and generally in good shape physically. The two German criminals (green triangles) in charge of the crew had other designs for me. They indicated in no uncertain terms, that they will be good to me if I am good to them... When Heinz, a bulk of a man, attempted to embrace me, I balked. I was extremely fortunate that the two homosexuals were more humane than some of the other kapos. I got away without being raped or beaten up.

That was the end of my easy job. At the lineup the following morning I was punished for my refusal to "cooperate"; I was assigned to another group. This time the work was very tough. I became a brick carrier. Under normal circumstances carrying bricks is no picnic. But to have to do it on an empty stomach is sheer torture. The load of bricks which I had to carry up a rickety ramp to the area where bricklayers toiled, felt like a million tons on my shoulders. The work was literally back breaking.

After several days, the brick carrying began to affect my health. Just as I was on the verge of a dangerous collapse, my assignment was changed again. Now I was pushing a load of cement in a wheelbarrow, on a rather flimsy scaffolding, high above the ground. I was scared, and not strong enough for this kind of strenuous work. At the next lineup I managed to switch to another



work commando. There was this huge pile of sand, which had a tendency to slide down and spread. My job was to prevent the sand from spreading, by shoveling it back on the pile. The trick was to place the sand in such a way, as to prevent it from sliding down again.

Working at that sand, which was not strenuous, gave me a chance to recover some of my strength, which was seriously affected by the bricks and concrete. Here also I experienced a rare in my memory act of human kindness. The sand pile was located at the foot of a higher elevation. There, on solid ground, an SS-guard was posted for twenty four hours a day, to guard the perimeter of the camp. At one time I noticed that the SS-man was engaged in a friendly conversation with a young woman. I assumed that the woman was Czech.

At some point I ~~became aware~~ that something was rolling down on the sand. I looked up and realized that a little girl, most likely the woman's child, was tossing things down while the guard was engrossed in the conversation, presumably with the girl's mother. An apple and a peach drifted down slowly and came to rest at the foot of the pile. I quickly picked them up, and, afraid to wave, I merely smiled at the little darling. I was both elated and moved by the simple act of helping a stranger; maybe only a child would risk that.

Days passed, Would the war ever end? It seemed to me as if the war was becoming permanent, with no end possible. <sup>To the</sup> Isolated, as we were, things did not seem to change. But then another small event occurred which changed my perception.

One day I was assigned to work in a field, picking up stones, and piling them up in a heap. It became quite dark, and the SS-man a rather decent, middle aged man, helped us to set a bonfire, from the bits of wood and branches on the ground.

Some fellows discovered nearby a cornfield, where ripe corn



simply begged to be picked. A few brave souls were able to persuade the guard to let us have some. Several ears of corn were procured and then roasted in the ashes. We had a veritable feast, in which the SSman unashamedly partook. It was a rare event, considering the circumstances.

We did not tell our decent SSman what we thought of his participation in our meal, but that fact cheered our small group enormously. It implied, by inference, that all is not well with the Nazis and their food supply.

Another outstanding experience concerned Gypsies. I was once assigned to a group of inmates who were pulling a wagon loaded with all kinds of camp debris. Manpower here substituted for horses, while the two mean overseers- our teamsters- were Gypsies. This was my first and only encounter with these people in the camps.

Despite their rather nasty behavior towards us, I felt a certain sympathy and even compassion for these two wretches. I thought that while the camp was hard on all prisoners, it must have been particularly hard on these people. Gypsies were from time immemorial roaming the countryside, always free and restless. And here they found themselves behind electrified, barbed wire, no more free. Naturally, they took their frustration out on us, the only scapegoats available to them.<sup>34</sup>

My brief stay at Leitmeritz came to an end sooner than I expected. One day I noticed a group of German civilians, arriving at the camp office. Their faces were vaguely familiar.

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<sup>34</sup> The Gypsies' tragedy paralleled that of the Jews. According to various estimates, between half a million and a million of them were exterminated by the Nazis. Gilbert's figure (Holocaust) is a 1/4 million.



The "Slave Dealers" were after some of us again.

Shortly afterwards the camp administration announced that it was seeking volunteers for two groups, each consisting of 200 "Häftlinge" (prisoners), for work elsewhere.

The hour for serious soul searching arrived. The sensible, I thought, principle of not volunteering, should not apply here. Leitmeritz was a cold, mean place. The kapos made our lives, particularly at waking time, utterly miserable. I decided to take a chance.

I reported to the first group. Then the second group was organized. The kapos were soon busy confiscating "good" articles of clothing, ~~and better~~ shoes. Shoes in the camps were particularly precious. An inmate with a pair of good, relatively well fitting shoes, was able to maintain his feet in decent shape; he had mobility. Woe to the unlucky owner of ill fitting shoes, or worse, a pair of wooden, Dutch style clogs, widely used in the camps. That unlucky person was often doomed in a short time. Needless to say, the best footwear was <sup>e</sup>reserved for the meanest kapos, who were always on the lookout for someone's good leather shoes, especially if the temporary owner was about to leave the camp.

Some of the people in the two groups, anticipating that reality, quickly exchanged their decent shoes for inferior ones, with friends who opted to stay behind. This was a well appreciated act of real friendship and generosity, hard to match anywhere.

We said goodbye to our friends, who decided to stay, and to the people in the other group, wondering if we will ever see them again. I had some good friends in the second group. I remember one young physician, whom I befriended at Leitmeritz. He tried hard to join the first group to be with me, but did not succeed. He



should have stayed at Leitmeritz, but, instead, he joined the other group. I learned later that he lasted only a few weeks in the new place. (When the war was over, I learned that the unlucky second group was sent to the notorious camp Mauthausen, where German criminals ruled over the inner administration. The prisoners worked in quarries. At the slightest deviation from the harsh rules, the kapos, or the SS guards, would push the victim from the top of the quarry to their death at the stony bottom. Only 23 people of the original 200 survived that horrible place. By comparison, most of our group survived.)

On October 19, 1944, less than ten weeks after our arrival here, our group was led to three freight wagons. The floor was covered with the usual straw, and a large pail, our portable toilet, was posted in a corner. We climbed up, about 66 or 67 men to a car. An elderly SSman joined us. There was a certain advantage to this. Because of his presence, the door was left open, giving us fresh air and a view of the outside world. Otherwise the situation was quite grim. The car was tightly packed with people, forcing us to sleep on our sides. If one prisoner wanted to move or turn, it affected all other sleepers. The pail in the corner was another source of misery. This was one of the most nightmarish trips I made, and somehow survived.

There was absolutely no food distributed. The train moved slowly, was often shunted to a siding, to stand there for hours. On the third day of our odyssey, the SSman took pity on us. On one of our frequent stops, he climbed down from the wagon, and in a few minutes returned with a large head of cabbage. With his pocket knife he cut up the cabbage into small chunks, and everybody got a small morsel of raw cabbage. That was our only meal on that trip.



## Dachau

On the fourth day, with a number of our people near death from thirst and hunger, our train finally arrived at its destination. The order came to disembark. All of us were weak from exhaustion, a few were dead, and several were unable to march. The SS forced us, in our sorry state, to carry the dead, and support the weakest.

Soon we entered the camp grounds, through an iron gate, over which a sign proclaimed: "Arbeit Macht Frei!" (Work makes you free). We were at the notorious Dachau concentration camp, in town of Dachau, near Munich.

It was noontime. Our SS escort took us to a very large roll call area, and, without a word of instruction, left us there. After a while, a contingent of local inmates marched up, carrying large pails, quite empty, as I could see, and proceeded to deposit them on the ground. To this day it is not clear to me what the purpose of these containers was. If they were meant to be our toilets, we certainly had no use for them. Our dehydrated, empty of nourishment bodies needed ~~XXXXXX~~ desperately some food and water, before we would need to use these repulsive, huge pails.

Several hours of agony passed and still nothing <sup>happened.</sup> All of a sudden we heard violent explosions in the distance. Rumors quickly spread (how? I don't remember) that the Allies just bombed the Dachau railroad station, and that among the casualties were some camp inmates.

Meanwhile it became dark. Nobody paid any attention to our desperate group. We felt forgotten and doomed. If food did not arrive soon, we shall all perish right there, in this cursed place. An air raid siren began to wail. To our great surprise, the



whole camp was inexplicably flooded with bright lights. SS guards a great many of them, came running, panic stricken. On the run they tried to hide their weapons under their tunics. On arrival at the square, they freely mingled with the assembled prisoners, making themselves invisible to the Allied pilots.

I temporarily forgot my misery, to take in the unusual spectacle. For the first time I was witnessing how the choice representatives of the "master race" were scared and disoriented just like ordinary mortals.

Shortly afterwards we saw the planes fly by. No bombs came down. Apparently the pilots were aware of Dachau. My blessings went out to the brave fliers. We all wished them well, and hoped that they would find their targets, without losses to themselves. The sirens sounded again, calling off the raid alert.

Late in the evening, the food finally arrived. Elderly German kapos, with red triangles and low serial numbers, indicating their long incarceration, (Dachau opened in 1933) doled out a tasty soup full of noodles. After our latest ordeal, the soup tasted heavenly. The kapos impressed me as decent and civil, in stark contrast to mostly criminal prisoners, who served as kapos elsewhere. Later I found out that these prisoners, all Germans, were here since the Nazis took over, in 1933! They must have been strong individuals, able to retain their humanity after so many years of incarceration. Most of them were socialists, communists, and others, who had enough character to resist the Nazis. I was duly impressed.

The meal was a real life saver. Our sagging spirits, thanks to the nourishing soup, were uplifted and hopes revived. Somebody in charge assigned our now animated and alive again group to block 25. We marched off, and, after crossing



another gate (apparently each block was isolated from the other barracks by barbed wire - at least in this part of the camp) arrived at our destination, a large wooden structure. We were permitted to retire for the night. Once more we were reprieved. I fell immediately into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

Feeling a little stronger the next morning, I was ready to face the world again. The usual ersatz coffee was doled out - some people used it to wash and shave, not a bad idea because it was at least hot- we were led in a long column to the bath. At that time we were yet unaware of the existence of the gas chambers so that the sight of a building with a large sign "Brausebad" (*Showers*) did not disturb us.

While we stood outside the bath, waiting to be admitted, another group arrived and was speedily led to the building. From their appearance I concluded that they must be newly arrested <sup>There were</sup> Germans. <sup>There were</sup> About fifty men. Some of them wore elegant fur coats and carried briefcases; others appeared to be working class people. <sup>These new prisoners probably</sup> arrived here directly from their homes, since all of them carried some sort of luggage.

After a while they emerged from the "Brausebad", completely transformed. All wore now the striped garb, known to us as "pasiaki" (the striped ones - in Polish). On their feet, replacing their comfortable shoes, were wooden clogs. Their hair was shaven off. The group appeared bewildered and confused. Where before we saw individuals, with all their differences, we now beheld just another group of prisoners.

That brief encounter gave me a lot to think about. It illustrated very graphically how the Nazis managed to destroy all opposition to their regime. My sympathy went out to these anonymous Germans, victims of the relentless repression by the state machine. Some-



how I was sure that they were brought here for some political "crimes", thereby making them our friends.

We took our showers without surprises, and returned to our block, only to be told that we must stay outside for the rest of the day. I decided to get better ~~acquainted~~ acquainted with the place, and looked around. In the adjoining compound, separated from us by barbed wire- what would the Nazis do without barbed wire?- men in clerical garb mingled about, conversing animatedly mostly in Polish. How ironic, I reflected, that Polish priests, not particularly known for philosemitism, were sharing our fate in this notorious place.

Shortly after our return from the bath, our people were assigned new serial numbers. My number, 118409, on an oblong piece of cloth, was placed under my red triangle. I was now for over four years a camp inmate, and among the important lessons I have learned was that one of the worst things for a concentration camp inmate was to be left in the camp, when others march off to work. The left over people were the natural candidates for all kinds of abuse. They were highly visible, with few places to hide, and the SS and the kapos were often on the lookout for such "work shirkers." Until Leitmeritz I was lucky to be employed as a medic. In Leitmeritz I managed somehow to avoid trouble. But here at Dachau there was nothing to do.

New Par. → When some of us tried to sneak in into the barrack, we were promptly chased out. The kapo declared flatly that no one is permitted to stay in, come rain or shine. There was no choice but linger outside all day long. Dressed as we were, in our paper thin pyjama like outfits, we were cold and miserable in the chilly October weather.

Two, or three days after our arrival, another dreaded mor-



ning greeted us with a steady drizzle. Our weary bodies shivered in the ill fitting uniforms..Spontaneously, all of us linked arms and swaying in unison, we began to hum, and eventually sing well known international songs. I looked around and realized that we shared the barrack with various nationalities, who together formed a block, about one thousand strong. Here, for the first time our Jewish group became integrated with gentiles. There were Frenchmen, Germans, Hungarians, Gypsies, Poles, even a few black Africans, probably from French or English colonies. (There were few independent African states in those days.) Also a large contingent of Italian prisoners. Since the fall of Mussolini, the Germans distrusted their former allies. As a result, many Italians were sent to camps, as suspected antifascists or anti-Nazis.

This was a reversal of our usual treatment by the Nazis. Until now their policy was always to isolate us from the non-Jewish population, with the ultimate aim of destroying us without outside interference. The ghettos and strictly Jewish camps served that purpose. Being incarcerated together with gentiles meant that there was some hope for us. Maybe that SS officer at the Budzyn camp, whose statement that we were now politicals I took as a joke, was serious after all.

We stood there for hours, on that memorable day, swaying in unison, arms linked, singing, until our parched throats gave out. Finally, as darkness fell, and the hot soup arrived, the "Block Aelteste" (block elder) let us in into the most welcome warmth of the barrack sanctuary.

Later, while trying to fall asleep on my pallet, I thought about the day just past. I thought about the linking of arms, which helped to lift our spirits, kept our bodies a little warmer, and made the day pass faster. It was true togetherness, under



the most trying circumstances.

### New Camp at Augsburg

On the seventh day of our stay at Dachau, our original group was assembled again and given orders to prepare for departure. We took leave of our friendly coprisoners, and mounted military trucks. After a relatively short and uneventful trip, we arrived at a large Luftwaffe (Air Force) base at Augsburg, an ancient Bavarian town, northwest of Dachau.

Our new quarters were in a large former Luftwaffe garage. For a change, our sleeping accomodations were double iron bunks. I was assigned a lower bed, although I knew from experience that being on top, for various reasons, was more desirable. We were permitted to retire early.

In the morning, after the usual chores, and the usual skimpy breakfast, people were sent to various jobs. I was lucky to be assigned on that first day to a military kitchen. It was a very up to date facility, where potatoes were peeled by a machine. Two of us were given the easy job of finishig the cleaning of these peeled potatoes, by removing the blemishes and eyes. The place was clean and cheerful, and the supervising soldier decent.

At lunch time, as we were hoping, they gave us a very nourishing soup, the same the soldiers themselves ate. During the break I was able to look around, and even enter the large hall, where the idling German pilots and support personel were sitting around, drinking beer and talking loudly.

I was amazed and pleased to hear some very unflattering words about the war and the Fuehrer. These soldiers were obviously very demoralized and tired of the war. After all, this was the autumn of 1944, and it was quite clear to these seasoned warriors that their war was already lost.



When our work was done at the end of the day, the cooks gave us some bread, one dark loaf for two people. Needless to say, we were very happy with our "pay." On our return to the garage "bedroom", my partner and I sat down on my bunk to divide the loaf. At that time a proud possessor of a spoon, whose handle was sharpened on one side to form a fairly efficient knife, I proceeded to cut the bread into two even halves. The two of us, engaged in conversation, carelessly took our eyes off the precious bread, long enough, apparently, for somebody who must have watched us, to sneak up to our bunk and snatch it from us. When we looked down, it was too late. The bread was gone!

We run around the bunks, which formed long rows, but it was useless. The thief disappeared in the maze. We bitterly cursed the mean s.o.b. and deplored our momentary lapse of attention.

I was to experience thievery once more in that place. For the first and only time since my incarceration, we were once given a dozen Yugoslav cigarettes. As a non-smoker, a rarity in those days, I decided to barter the cigarettes for some food. That night, on retiring, I put the pack in my pants pocket, and, carefully folding the pants, put them under my head, to serve as a pillow. To my chagrin, on waking up I discovered that my pants were pulled from under me during the night. The precious cigarettes were, of course, gone. When I complained bitterly to an inmate who was at Augsburg for some time, about my loss, he enlightened me that the infamous thieves in the camp were mostly Russians, who were highly skilled in that activity.

The smokers in the camp often traded their portions of bread for a few cigarettes. I also observed some of them, quite desperate for a smoke, strip the brooms made of twigs, of the last remaining leaves, to produce foul smelling "tobacco". This the



poor wretches wrapped in bits of newspaper, and smoked, to satisfy their addiction. I was glad not to be a victim of a bad habit as these people were.

After a few days of odd jobs, we were lined up one day, and, under SS guard with their dogs, marched off, through the streets of Augsburg, to a railroad station. On the way German civilians looked at our group, most likely thinking that we were convicts, put in camp for cause. We boarded a regular passenger train,- what a luxury- and, after an half hour ride, arrived at a place called Horgau,

We were taken, through woods, to well camouflaged barracks. Earlier we heard from German Air Force personnel, that the main Messerschmidt airplane factory at Augsburg was heavily damaged by Allied bombing. The German authorities were desperate to produce badly needed parts. In these barracks they attempted to continue the production.

We continued these daily trips to Horgau and back, for about a month, producing very little. Meanwhile, interesting things were happening on the streets, through which we passed twice daily on our way to and from the station. Some decent souls among the local populace must have noticed that <sup>the</sup> group of "Katzetler", as we were known in the German vernacular, was passing the same streets every day. Our people began to find in the gutters cigarettes, apples, and other small items. Luckily, the SS was not aware of these finds.

Our group became known as the Commando Horgau. Since the work in the Messerschmidt barrack was nothing but a joke, our daily trips to and from Horgau became the real highlight of our days. Were it not for the meager rations, our lot would not really be, comparatively speaking, too bad.



Sometimes in November of that year two Russian POW's made their appearance at our camp. Captured after escaping from their camp, they were brought to our place, I imagine, because it was closest to their place of capture. They were now awaiting a decision from Berlin as to their fate. Sturdily built, both looked like typical Russian peasants, used to hardships, yet friendly, ready to greet people with a smile.

For some reason they were posted everyday just inside our camp-garage door, where they stood all day long. Many of us felt sorry for them, and those who could afford it, shared with them bits of food, when the guards were not looking. The Russians began to fill out their previously lean bodies, their spirits improved, and all seemed well with the world.

For almost three weeks the two men formed a part of our landscape, as we departed in the mornings and returned in the evenings. It was forbidden to talk to them, so smiles and winks were all the communication we could exchange. Most of us became fond of the two good natured POW's, so the shock was greater when, on our return to the camp one day, we found them gone. Those who stayed behind told us their sad story.

The verdict came from Berlin: the two were sentenced to die. The Germans prepared temporary gallows; they were good at that kind of tasks. While the two victims stood on chairs, with ropes around their necks, an SS officer read their sentences. (It is worth mentioning that Jews never "enjoyed" such formalities.) Suddenly, one of the Russians, in a supreme effort managed to kick the German in the face. The POW lost his balance, and knocking over the chair, strangled himself. His comrade yelled out: "Down with Hitler! Long live Stalin! Long live the Soviet Union!" He was quickly silenced, when an SS man jerked the chair from un-



der him. The SS officer left the scene to nurse his hurt in private.

Everybody in the camp was shaken up by the event. We watched these two amiable fellows, whose names we will never know, standing there at the door, looking better everyday, nourished by the sacrifice of our people, and now they were gone. These two joined the countless Soviet POW's, murdered by the merciless Nazi machine.

#### Air Raids, Transfer to a new Camp

As if to cheer us up, the Allies renewed their air raids on Augsburg, and specifically on the remnants of the Messerschmidt factory. Sometimes the planes came twice a day. As soon as the mournful siren started its wail, the Luftwaffe officers and their support personnel, each dragging heavy suitcase, full of loot, no doubt, would run for the open field adjoining the barracks. They cursed as they run. They cursed the war, they cursed the Allies, they even cursed the beloved "Fuehrer." There was no end to their "Donnerwetters" and "Verdammt". Strangely enough, we inmates were ordered to follow the Germans into the open fields. The idea of escaping crossed my mind, but where to?

Once I was sitting on a hill, observing the planes swoop down and dropping their load of bombs, with virtually no German flak. Suddenly a chunk of metal fall near me. I recklessly picked it up. It was still very hot, nearly burning my fingers. It appeared to be a part of the bomb's tail. While I enjoyed the spectacle, fear of being hit never entered my mind.

On several occasions I was assigned to the Luftwaffe barracks to do some work. The Germans were idle; there were apparently no planes for them to fly. It was with glee, that we, inmates,



observed their increasing demoralization. Some openly mocked the top leaders, especially the Luftwaffe head, marshal Goering. A few amused themselves once, by shooting at some posters and pictures of the leaders, with their rifles.

Frustrated by their inability, for some reason, to produce anything at Augsburg, the <sup>German managers</sup> decided to close down Horgau. On December first our group was again on the move. In the evening military trucks delivered us to a new camp at Leonberg, near Stuttgart.

Leonberg was a branch of the notorious Natzweiler concentration camp. Our new camp, located in a hilly area, known for its vineyards, consisted of several brick buildings, surrounded, naturally, by barbed wire. The ground was unpaved and unbelievably muddy. After a rain, or wet snow, the wooden clogs of many of our people would sink in that mud during the daily marches to and from work.

Underneath one of the hills, about a mile from the camp, a double tunnel was carved out in the rock, part of an "Autobahn" (speedway). Now the desperate Germans, pursuing the illusory safety for their crumbling war industry, took over the two tunnels for the manufacture of Messerschmidt airplane parts. This was now the place where we spent most of our days.

Heavy snows came, and we experienced a new menace. When the snow became hard, it would cling to the soles of our shoes, and build up layers of it, until it felt like walking on stilts. Often, under the heavy load of the accumulated snow, the clogs would fall off the tired feet. Those of us who still had the energy, would fling the offending clogs with a kick in the air, and the heavy layers of snow would fall off, until the next cycle. It was pure torture for our abused feet.



A large commando was assigned to pave the muddy ground with cobblestones. That task was made unbearable by the SS guards who supervised the work. Often they would pounce on some unlucky inmate for no discernible reason, and beat him mercilessly. One particularly vicious Nazi, known as Hujara, was rumored to have come from Auschwitz, where he was known for his "specialty", knocking a victim down into a puddle, and, placing his foot on the victim's neck with the face down in the water, hold it there, until the prisoner suffocated. (By that time we had heard already about Auschwitz from Poles and others.)

Luckily, this practice was not "fashionable" anymore, maybe because the war was going badly for the "master race." Now Hujara had to be content with merely beating people up. A gentile Polish engineer, who was put in charge of the paving project, became his particular victim. I saw him hit him repeatedly with a wooden stick over his bare head, yelling: "Verfluchte Pole!" (damn Pole). As I recall, the elderly Pole had a bald head, and the almost daily mistreatment must have been painful in the extreme. I felt compassion for the poor man, struggling with his crew to cover the muddy ground with matching stones.

For a few days I marched with the rest of the inmates to the tunnels. The air inside was stale, smelling strongly of metallic rust. The noise of sheet metal parts being moved about was ear shattering. We worked there under *very harsh* conditions.

Again I was lucky. After a day of carrying heavy parts, probably sections of plane wings, I was assigned by a German civilian to organize small parts on shelves. There I was able to indulge in a little sabotage. After I arranged all parts neatly on a shelf, when nobody was around I would pull one part from underneath the assembly, and the whole orderly pile would come crushing down to



the floor. My supervisor would come over, curse, and order me to clean up. I should note here that the German civilians mellowed considerably, and treated the "Kz-lers" with much more consideration than previously. They must have seen the writing on the wall...

Then, suddenly, I became ill with fever. I developed an infection in my mouth. The thing looked serious. In the morning I reported to my block leader, who ordered me to go to the infirmary, located in the basement of our building. In the large room a table, cluttered with medical paraphernalia, cooked potatoes, and pieces of bread, stood near the door. An iron cot, presumably the doctor's bed, stood in a corner.

The young, untidy doctor turned out to be an Italian prisoner, who spoke only a scant German. I joined the line of about a dozen people who were waiting patiently, while the doctor was busy examining the first inmate with a stethoscope.

I felt feverish and weak. When I finally reached the table, the doctor examined me, took my temperature, and shook his head. In broken German he informed me that my case is serious and that I must go the Revier to see the senior doctor. I was informed that the Revier is located in another section of the camp, about a half a mile away.

Eventually I joined several other prisoners, also seriously ill, and, guarded by an SS man, dragged myself to the Revier. There our group was presented to the chief doctor, an Ukrainian from Kiev.

Doctor Nicolai, an older man, rarely smiled (he must have seen a lot) but was decent and humane. For the benefit of the SS he tried to hide his ~~humaness~~ ~~ness~~, by being gruff and brusque with the patients.



The "vratch" (physician, in Russian) decided that I have to stay in the Revier for a while. An orderly brought me a wash basin full of ice cold water. "Get undressed and wash up!" I meekly obeyed. I had no energy left to protest the cold water treatment. I washed up in chilly water, and stood, naked and shivering. Nobody paid any attention to me. I was ready to collapse, when I heard somebody yell from one of the upper bunks: "Arbus, Arbus, come over here and climb up!" A friendly soul, whose name I did not remember, recognized me as a fellow inmate from Budzyn, and now he offered me his hospitality. Somebody handed me a nightshirt, which I gratefully put on, and walked over to the bunk. I had no strength left to hoist myself to the upper bunk. My new friend climbed down, and helped me up. I immediately stretched out on the straw sack, and my partner joined me under the warm blanket. I slept for many hours.

When I woke up, I felt slightly better after the night's rest in the warm bed. Soon doctor Bloch, a Czech Jew, who acted as doctor Nicolai's assistant, came over to me. "Your case is quite serious" he pronounced. I said: "Doctor Bloch, I was a medic in previous camps, and I am aware of the seriousness of my situation. What can you do to help me?" Doctor Bloch, who appeared to be a decent person, promised to bring some sulfa tablets, which, he confided to me, he stashed away somewhere.

Penicillin was still unknown in those days, but sulfa drugs were quite effective in many infectious diseases. In the afternoon doctor Bloch came back and gave me some Prontosil tablets, I swallowed three or four immediately with some water, and took the rest in the next couple of days. Those red tablets saved my life. My fever dropped, and the lump in my mouth receded. I was on the way to recovery.



The senior doctor was quite satisfied with my progress, and, apparently informed by my "personal" physician, doctor Bloch, about my "semi-medical" background, came over one afternoon to chat. From him I heard for the first time about the massacre of Jews and others at Babi-Yar, in his native Kiev.

"I was at that time still in Kiev" doctor Micolai related "and I heard from other people that the German fascists executed many Jews in a ravine, known as Babi Yar. Everybody in Kiev knew it. They brought men, women, and children to the edge of the ravine and machine gunned them to death."

I was particularly affected by his story, since my two brothers, the oldest, Julian, and the youngest, Joseph, were residing in the Soviet occupied part of Poland, when the Nazis struck. The sad truth was that, constantly preoccupied with our daily struggle to survive the day, we hardly had time to worry about our dear ones, and I was no exception. Perhaps the only time when I would think about my family and friends was, when exhausted after a long day, I could finally lay down on my bunk. That short period between stretching out on the hard pallet, and falling asleep, was the time which I could call my own. At other times other worries: how to survive the day, and how to satisfy the needs of one's body, which demanded so much effort, predominated.

### Selection!

My recovery was progressing satisfactorily, thanks to doctor Bloch's Prontosil tablets. Just in time. Rumors spread that there is going to be a selection. This time, instead of being on the outside, safe to a certain degree, I was going to be directly affected. I spent a worrisome night.



→ Early next morning an SS noncom appeared in the Revier. He was the German in charge of the medical facilities at Leonberg, which really meant that he decided about our life or death. Herr Oberscharfuehrer Schmitz, a tall, very businesslike German, was clean shaven and his boots well polished. Come to think of it, most Nazis that I encountered in the camps were just like him. Always clean cut, well scrubbed and ruthless. They only differed in the degree of cruelty they displayed. At the moment I did not yet know that my destiny was to have further dealings with this "health" functionary.

At the moment I was worried about the drama being played out on the floor of the infirmary. My eyes (and everybody else's) were glued to the faces of Schmitz and our chief doctor, who were moving from bunk to bunk, discussing each case, with the master of life and death making fateful decisions on the spot. To my alarm, I saw people being removed from their beds, and, without overcoats and bareheaded, taken to a truck parked outside. This was the middle of winter, and it<sup>was</sup> bitterly cold outside. These sick, weak people could not possibly survive more than a few hours. Mentally I prepared myself to the same fate. I consoled myself that at least there would not be much suffering while freezing to death.

Rumors spread that the transports ~~is~~ being sent to Bergen-Belsen, a place I never heard of before. I did not think many would arrive there alive.

Then the SS man stopped in front of my bunk. "What about him?" he inquired of doctor Nicolai. Once again my life was saved by a doctor's steadfastness. The Kievan did not disappoint me. "Oh, he is already cured, he can go back to work tomorrow!" The two moved to the next bed. I was safe.



My private relief and joy was tempered by what I saw around me. I watched as people, deemed expendable by Herr Schmitz, were removed from their beds and forced to leave the facility, without adequate clothing, out into the cold unknown. The doomed patients, too weak to offer any, even minimal resistance, looked resigned to their fate. To add to my distress, I discovered that doctor Bloch, for whom I developed a genuine affection, was designated to accompany the transport. Sending him along with the doomed group was a typical Nazi ruse, meant to deceive. Never mind that most of the "selectees" will die on the way; formalities, such as sending a physician along, must be followed. I never found out what the fate of that transport was, nor did I see doctor Bloch, a decent and gentle man, ever again.

On the morning after that tragic event, I was discharged from the Revier. My striped rags, my shoes, and my belt, <sup>(the belt was</sup> ~~the only~~ item of clothing I still retained from my civilian life,) were returned to me, and I was told to be ready for departure. At noontime I was escorted, with a few other lucky individuals, back to our block. in the newer part of the Leonberg camp.

### My New "Career"

I don't remember what kind of day it was, whether it was sunny or cloudy, to me it was a great day. Even the prospect of returning to the noisy, stifling tunnels did not faze me. I was young, relatively healthy, and determined to go on. But while I was thinking these rosy thoughts, my physical appearance, of which I was acutely aware, was very bad. I was thin, unshaven, dressed in filthy rags, just a step ahead of a "musulman". I realized that I must do something to improve my appearance.

A new twist in my fate quickly resolved that problem. As



soon as we reached the "home" grounds, I encountered two men who were apparently looking for me. "Arbus, Arbus, we have to talk to you!" (For some reason, people in the camps always called me by my last name) One of the two, Joseph Koplewicz, a young lawyer from Warsaw, developed earlier a great faith in my medical abilities. When he arrived with the Warsaw group to Budzyn, he complained to me of headache, but I found him feverish, took him to the Revier, where he was diagnosed to have erysipelas, a rather dangerous infectious disease. He recovered, and felt grateful. Our friendship continued through several camps. He now occupied some administrative position in the camp. The second man, Jacek Marecki, also a lawyer, held the very influential position of camp clerk.

Marecki, a Christian Pole and an exceptionally bright and intelligent individual, was very friendly and outgoing. (Jacek Marecki became, after liberation, the Polish consul in Berlin. I then lost track of him.) Now these two men were telling me something strange. Could that be true? "Arbus, you are the new Lagerarzt!" Thoroughly bewildered, I asked them: "What do you mean?" After all, I was not a doctor. My "official" position in some of the camps was only of a so called "Sanitaeter" (Sanitary worker) which meant that I performed the function of a nurse or medic.

Joseph explained: "Oberscharfuehrer Schmitz came yesterday to the dispensary (the same day he conducted the selection. He must have been in a mood for that sort of thing all day long) saw the awful mess on the table, and, furious that the young Italian physician did not maintain an orderly facility, (orderliness being so dear to the German psyche) dismissed him outright. He was so angry that he even slapped the poor doctor



several times, screaming: "Badoglio, Badoglio!" <sup>35</sup>

Feeling sorry for the unlucky Italian would not help much; Schmitz was the ultimate ruler in these matters. The Italian was ordered to report to work in the tunnels the next day. Such were the changing fortunes in the Nazi kingdom.

On my friends' recommendation, I was commandeered to take over the dispensary. My new position entitled me to get better clothing. I went to the stockroom where I was outfitted with a brand new striped uniform, considerably better in quality than my previous one, and got fresh underwear. And I moved the same day into my new quarters, the dispensary room in the basement.

I had now my own cot, and blessed privacy, after the working day was over. In that environment, where an individual counted for nothing, to have a bit of privacy was the height of privilege, available only to a few lucky prisoners, mostly kapos.

My first job was to clean up the mess left by the unfortunate doctor. I made an inventory of my supplies, and cleaned up my work table, laying out neatly the necessary items on one side. I was ready for my first "clients."

I was quite aware that the coming days will not be easy for me, having to work under the tough supervision of Herr Schmitz. But I decided not to worry too much about it. At the moment I felt extremely fortunate. My situation has changed drastically in one day. From a would be selection victim I turned into a privileged "Lagerarzt." I did not have to march in mud anymore. I could keep clean, and what was most important, I would be

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Badoglio, the Italian marshall, rose up against Mussolini in July of 1943.



able to do what I knew best: help my fellow prisoners with their health problems, thanks to the considerable skill I acquired in the previous camps. I was very grateful to my two friends and sponsors.

Taking a cue from the Italian doctor's misfortune, I kept the place clean and orderly. I also established a daily routine: in the morning, after the roll-call, sick people lined up in front of the table, I heard each person's complaint, and attended to their numerous boils, wounds, or abrasions. My medical supplies were meager, but adequate under the circumstances. My adhesive tape was made of paper, and resembled, very closely, masking tape; bandages were also made of strong paper. But I had sterile gauze, iodine, aspirin, and a fever thermometer.

Patients with fever, and more serious illnesses were told to return later. In the afternoon I assembled these people, and escorted them to the Revier, to see doctor Nicolai. Naturally, an SS-man always accompanied us on these visits.

But my duty as the camp medic sometimes tested my limits. Most of our people were undernourished and subject to all kinds of known and unknown health hazards. While the serious cases were treated at the Revier, often I had to deal with marginal cases, where the individual was not really sick in the ordinary sense, but simply exhausted or weakened by the severe conditions of camp life. In such cases, I decided, on my own initiative, to give the person a slip of paper, addressed to the given block's kapo, stating that two or three days of rest were advised. Our kapos were, by and large, reasonable, and mostly honored my slips.

Such slips were known in the camps by their German, very apt designation as "Schonung". The possessors of these slips, normally issued by the camp physicians, were left in the camp



and had a chance to recover their strength a bit. But, as I indicated elsewhere, remaining in the camp during the daytime also had its risks. Schmitz, my SS boss, came once to the barracks, saw several people huddling about, was shown my "Schönung" slips when he inquired, and became furious. Naturally, he rushed over to my place. "Was ist loss?" he screamed. "How dare you issue so many permissions to stay away from work? This is sabotage! Next time I find so many work shirkers in the camp, you will hang!" He tore up the slips and left.

After that outburst, I was more cautious with dispensing these sometimes life saving slips of paper. But I continued to issue them to those who needed them badly, regardless. But I cautioned the recipients to make themselves invisible, in case of another visit by Schmitz.

In a few isolated cases, inmates attempted to bribe me with offers of money, or other valuables, in exchange for those precious slips. But, quity frankly, the sight of a few dollars did not tempt me. Money, so crucial under normal conditions, did not mean much in our closed camp world. Possession was also dangerous. So my only motivation was to try to do what I could to assist those in need. I was never religious, in fact, I would describe myself as an agnostic, but I believe strongly in this kind of a secular "mitzvah" (good deed). Also, my own predicament, a short while back, when I was so ill and vulnerable, was still fresh in my memory.

Among the more outstanding cases among my patients, I can recall a Jehovah's Witness, who was brought to me very ill. Unfortunately, he was already beyond help. He practically died in my arms, a victim of extreme exhaustion, and most likely, pneumonia.

Another patient, a young Czech Jew, disturbed me greatly. I do hope that he survived the war. His case was quite unique.



The morning he came, he stood patiently in line, a tall, handsome man, in the prime of his life. When his turn came, he unceremoniously let down his pants and his undershorts, to reveal a shocking black hole, the size of a silver dollar, and about a quarter of an inch deep, near his scrotum. I asked him what caused that wound. He calmly explained to me that he was one of the numerous guinea pigs at Auschwitz, and that he was subjected to experiments to sterilize Jews by means of X-rays.

I could not do much for him, except to cover the damaged area with gauze and tape. I knew that he was extremely lucky to have survived his ordeal and that the SS normally did not tolerate a subject of their brutal experiments to be still around. I implored the young man, discreetly, to be extremely careful. I thought that he would be an important witness, after the war was over.

#### A French "Guest"

A French dentist, René, joined me in my basement. A middle aged, friendly man, he appeared almost elegant, in his striped uniform of the best quality. A cot was put up in another corner of the dispensary, and some dental equipment was set up on a separate table.

His singular assignment was to survey the teeth of all inmates, and record any gold crowns or fillings. The methodical Germans, greedy and rapacious, wanted to make sure that no victim of their cruelty would be buried with some gold bridge-work or crown still in the mouth. I was aware of infamous practices of this nature by the SS, but this was the first time that I personally encountered it. The gold thus obtained was supposed to be shipped to the Reichsbank, but often found its way



into the private pockets of the SS hierarchy.

Rene, because of his important assignment, was well treated by the SS. He was, however, no friend of theirs. He was a Parisian, a member of the Resistance, where his underground work involved procuring false I.D.'s for Jews and others in need of such documents. He suspected that he was denounced to the Gestapo by some French collaborator, and sent to a concentration camp.

He spoke a good German and we were able to converse quite nicely. He was very intelligent and well informed. Because of his special task, René was transferred often, and was able to observe the goings on in various camps. Here was another man who would be an excellent witness, when the war was over.

All inmates of the Leonberg camp were ordered to report to the dentist. Now we had two lines in the basement, one for the dentist's "survey", and another for my services.

A week later, his work completed, Rene packed his instruments, and left our camp under escort. I was sorry to see him go. I became quite fond of him, and he was good company. But, as a roving dentist, he had to go to his next assignment at another camp.

A while later I heard good news about René. Apparently the clever Frenchman outwitted the SS on that last trip. He got hold of some civilian clothing, which he put on in the washroom of the passenger train on which he was travelling, and vanished. His chances of a successful escape were good. His German was good, he was not Jewish, and he was not too far from the French border. And possibly he had accomplices to assist him. I missed his companionship, but was very glad that he was now a free man.

For some time now, I got an occasional assistant in my



work, a young Ukrainian physician, by the name of Mieczyslaw, <sup>who</sup> was sent to me by the Revier. He was the exact opposite of my recent French companion. A spoiled brat, he often did things to our patients, that were not very helpful to them. Sometimes, unexpectedly, he would apply iodine, where it was not needed. His often childish behavior was irritating in the extreme. It was hard to believe that this unpleasant mischief maker actually attended medical school, as he claimed he did.

I had to put up with him, but did not to hesitate to rebuke him every time he was ready for another practical joke he was so fond of inflicting on a patient. His "jokes" were applied to Jewish and non-Jewish patients, so I could not accuse him of being anti-Semitic. He was simply a mean, foolish character. A few times I complained to doctor Nicolai, and eventually he took him off my hands.

### Another Bread Thief

My daily visits to the Revier were indirectly the reason, why one evening I became an amateur detective, in a concentration camp, of all places! At the Revier a young Jewish inmate who worked there as an orderly, asked me to help him with a problem he had. His older brother worked in our camp, and he had no access to him. The orderly wanted me to deliver to his brother a portion of bread. These things were always risky, but I could not, in good conscience, refuse the caring brother's plea. Thus I became embroiled in an affair, <sup>that,</sup> were it not for the deadly seriousness of the business, would have had strong comic aspects.

I used to keep this bread and my own ration, in a wooden box under my iron cot. In the evening, when the people returned



from work, I would deliver the precious bread to the grateful brother of the orderly. One day, on my return from some errand, I discovered the door to the dispensary ajar. Since the door was always kept locked, I immediately suspected a break-in. Disturbed, I dashed to the cot, and, sure enough, the box was wide open, sans bread. I was near tears.

After I calmed down, I quickly decided on a plan of action. I reasoned that, since the thief got hold of two portions, he most likely hid some, to retrieve <sup>them</sup> it later. I was determined to find the thief, otherwise my food, and that of the orderly's brother, would be always in jeopardy. The stolen commodity was much more important than money or jewels. Stealing one's bread in the camps was a grave offense; everybody understood that.

I had to search the area. Under the staircase, diagonally across from my dispensary door, there was a niche, used for storing parts of iron stoves and pipes. There, hidden behind some pipes, I found, without difficulty, the missing bread, wrapped in paper, both portions still intact. With a heavy heart I decided to set a trap for the daring thief.

As night fell, I set up a chair in the niche, wrapped myself in a blanket, and sat down, waiting. The whole enterprise was rather risky; outside an SS guard patrolled the area all night long. But I was driven by the need to expose the bread thief. At that time I was still smarting from the memory of that delicious military bread I lost at Augsburg. I was well motivated.

Sitting there, in that ridiculous place under the stairs, I thought strange thoughts about our condition. Exhausted, I fell asleep, dreaming of distant places. It must have been after midnight when I awoke with a start. Somebody was in front of me, unaware of my presence in the darkness. I grabbed the



shadowy figure of the apparition. He managed to suppress a scream, as he well knew the great danger lurking outside. I pushed the fellow toward the light of the staircase to see his face, and then wordlessly let him go.

In the morning I briefly discussed the case with a few friends. The miserable fellow was a well known thief, who was caught several times in the past. We decided that, to stop that wretch from further mischief, he had to be punished. Reluctantly, I went to the kapo, a Jewish fellow with a rather decent record, and told him the story. Before revealing the name of the culprit, I had him promise to <sup>be</sup> lenient. The thief got away with a couple of lashes, and he had to promise to stay away from the dispensary, unless he needed medical help. He kept his word. The incident left an unpleasant memory; I did not like to deal with kapos, no matter how decent they were. I felt somewhat justified in this case, because another victim was also involved,

#### The Spring of 1945

Meanwhile the memorable spring, the last in that terrible war, arrived, bringing renewed hope. Allied planes began to bomb our area. At least once, sometimes twice daily, we were forced to struggle through the mud to reach the tunnels, which served as our air raid shelters.

One time the bombs fell right near the entrance. The lights went out, and the Germans were near panic. Apparently the Allies knew of the existence of the hidden factory, but were unable to penetrate the hill protecting the tunnels.

Another transport of prisoners arrived, and among the newcomers I found some old friends from Budzyn. There was a lot of handshaking and embracing at this "reunion".



A new disease, like some biblical plague, made its appearance at Leonberg. Several patients showed up with fever and other classic symptoms of erysipelas. Known to us as the Rose (from the Polish name for the disease, Roza), the highly infectious disease usually manifests itself by a flaming, clearly defined red patch, resembling a rose, hence the name. It is formed around a tiny scratch or other damage to the skin, which the streptococcus bacteria penetrates. It could have been life threatening among our weaker patients. Fortunately, there were no deaths attributable to the disease at that time. The most frequent cases that I had seen had those patches formed on the noses of the patients, and were thus highly visible. I had them all confined to the Revier, where all of them recovered.

It was almost inevitable that I would become infected from treating others. Preventive measures, such as rubber gloves, and a sterile environment, were not available, of course, and I prepared myself for the trouble. On retiring one night, I spotted a red patch on my right leg. I decided not to report my problem, greatly concerned with my life saving position in the camp. The thought that a guy like Mieczyslaw might be assigned in my place was unthinkable.

Next morning I managed to procure some Sulfa tablets from the Revier. Once again this marvelous drug saved me from a calamity. After a few days of self treatment the patch began to recede, and finally disappeared completely. Of course I was fortunate that the red patch surfaced on my leg, thus being invisible to others. I was elated with my successful cure and that I did not have to interrupt my work. In fact, no one in the camp even knew about my trouble.

The war was coming closer to us. The artillery fire could be heard all day long, rising our hopes. No wonder that to



our ears it sounded like sweet music. Those in Leonberg who still had enough energy left after a hard day's work, formed groups to discuss the coming end of the war. I sometimes joined a group of Christian Poles, among whom Jacek Marecki was the brightest. In contrast to the other Poles who were mostly right wing nationalists, often anti-Semitic, he was an idealistic patriot, liberal in outlook.

He firmly believed that the reborn Poland would be socialist, (the pernicious Soviet influence was still in the future) and also, quite correctly, predicted that the Polish borders would shift to the West. His politics did not sit well with the other, more conventional Poles, whose outlook was narrowly circumscribed by the Church and Polish chauvinism.

As the Allied planes kept flying over our area, we became quite puzzled by bits of aluminum foil falling like silver snow from the skies. Later, of course, the puzzle was solved; the purpose of that metallic chaff was to deceive German radar.

#### Evacuation of Leonberg

On April 4, 1945, orders came to get ready for evacuation. We were all very excited, but also worried. Where would they take us now? We knew from camp gossip, and some German sources, that the Russians were also advancing from the East. We were all conscious of the possibility that the Nazis might decide to wipe us out in the last minute. While on the alert, we could *not, at the moment, do much.*

A long column was formed, and surrounded by heavily armed SS men, accompanied by their specially trained dogs, we proceeded in the direction of the tunnels. On approaching, we were alarmed to see boxes of dynamite, piled up on both side of the



tunnel entrance. The wooden crates were ominously wired up, and guarded by soldiers.

Our slow moving, long column entered the tunnel. I am sure that the others wondered, as I did, whether we will ever see the proverbial light at the other end. As long as the SS was with us we felt safe. The tunnel was long, the yelling of the excited and nervous guards earsplitting, the scene unforgettable. Our anxiety finally eased when we reached the exit. On the outside, again, crates of dynamite. There was an almost audible sigh of relief from the crowd of prisoners.

We continued on our march, glad to see the dreadful tunnels recede in the distance.<sup>36</sup> We moved on in the easterly direction for quite a while. My strength was beginning to give out. Our collective energy was boosted somewhat by the sight of the heavily damaged city of Stuttgart, on whose outskirts we beheld bombed out buildings, with only their shells left standing. Abandoned trolleys, their windows shattered, formed an eery group on the main street on which we were marching. Crowds of German civilians looked at us with indifferent eyes. Some of them probably blamed us for the disaster that befell them.

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Pizar, the well known international lawyer, was also at Leonberg. On page 88 of his book "Of Blood and Hope" (Boston, 1980, Little, Brown and Co.) I found the following story:

"...we were awakened by a deafening blast, a rolling explosion that shook the whole camp. At dawn, part of the mountain was missing. The entire installation had been sealed off by the Nazis and blown up, together with the machinery. Many of the prisoners working the night shift were buried under the wreckage." Apparently, when our group left, another section was still there, to suffer the atrocity we feared.



On this march I observed first hand the contempt Germans felt for other nationalities, even affecting their allies. In our ranks were Hungarians, some of whom spotted friends or neighbors, or maybe even relatives on the sidewalks. These were Hungarian soldiers, who, escaping from advancing Soviet troops, were now roaming the streets of German cities, still in their Hungarian uniforms, but without arms.

To the SS they were obviously inferiors, and when one of them spotted such a reunion, he would swoop on both, the prisoner and the soldier, cursing and screaming. Hitting both with his rifle, he would force the inmate back into the ranks, and send the "ally" on his way. I witnessed several such incidents on that day.

I saw some daring individuals dash into buildings, but this was extremely risky, particularly for Jews. I decided that the time was not ripe for such risk taking, not yet. The unfolding events should afford better opportunities for escape later.

At one point in <sup>the</sup> long, slow march, a convoy of German soldiers passed us on the street. They were going in the opposite direction, that is, to the front. The soldiers were surprisingly friendly to us, yelling words of encouragement, some even tossing candy into our ranks. The SS men, naturally, were furious. I soaked in the scene with mixed feelings of both pleasure and anxiety. It was clear that the Third Reich was near collapse, but our fate was still in the hands of the unpredictable SS.

We eventually reached the Stuttgart railroad station. There, despite the devastation visible around us, stood a freight train, ready to take us into yet another unknown destination. The efficiency of the Nazi bureaucratic apparatus was amazing,



but its obsession with the prisoners was more than one would expect from rational people. I saw it previously at Mielec, where we were evacuated ahead of the German civilians, and I saw it again here.

Once again squeezed into the roofless, straw bedecked cars, we traveled all night, often being shunted to side tracks for long periods. In the late afternoon of the next day we arrived at a camp known as Kaufering, near Landsberg, the site of a well known fortress. (Hitler was incarcerated at that fortress in the nineteen twenties.)

Our "quarters" at Kaufering consisted simply of trenches, originally dug up to store potatoes for the winter, now covered with flimsy corrugated sheet metal roofs. These dreadful hovels, unfit even for cattle, were, in the eyes of the SS good enough for us.

Luckily, our transport spent only two nights in this horrid place. On the third day they took us again to a railroad siding. We moved further east. On the 7th of April 1945, our exhausted, half dead column was taken to another camp. Ganacker, the new place, was a branch of the familiar to most of us main camp Flossenburg.

A minor, unrecorded tragedy occurred on the march to that camp, somewhere in the eastern part of Bavaria. Three young Russians, who marched with us, found some grain, apparently laced with strychnine or another poison, behind a barn near the roadway. To any straight thinking person it was quite obvious that this poisoned grain was put out by a farmer to kill rats, but these poor souls were so crazed by hunger that they ate the grain on the spot. Two died on the march, a third held out longer. It was my task to deal with that poor fellow later.



Ganacker, My Final Camp

At Ganacker there were primitively built small huts made of thin plywood. I was ordered to take charge of the sick prisoners. Two such small huts, each about ten by twenty feet, were assigned to serve as the Revier. I designated one as the infirmary, the other was to serve as our dispensary, as well as my quarters.

I immediately arranged for several ill marchers to be bed down on the straw covered floor in the infirmary. Somebody brought in the unfortunate Russian boy, who was clearly beyond any help. The person who brought him in told me the story of the poisoned grain. I was at a loss to understand, or rather I understood but could not believe.

That first night at the new place, unable to sleep because of the tension, I lay on the straw wondering what the next few days might bring. The two orderlies, who slept in the adjoining infirmary, alerted me to the trouble they were having with the Russian. He was dying a horrible death and tossed in pain, disturbing the other patients.

I really did not know what to do. I had nothing to give him, and nowhere to turn for help. Reluctantly, with the help of the two orderlies, I tied up the dying man with his own belt, to keep him from tossing around. In the morning his suffering came to an end.

The irrationality of that tragedy, and the fact that I was unable to help, bothered me a lot. But there was more irrationality yet to come. For example, how rational would it be for the Germans to build an airstrip for the Luftwaffe at this late stage, when the enemy was closing in from the East and the West?



Yet, this is precisely what they were doing at Ganacker, using half starved slaves for the hard work.

Our people toiled daily, using shovels and pickaxes to clear a former potato field for the enterprise. I watched with sorrow as the inmates marched off every morning to that field and returned toward evening, carrying their tools, and usually *also* several dying or dead comrades on improvised litters. In the last moments of the war, the SS was still implementing their cruel slogan: "Arbeit macht frei."

The daily routine could not go on much longer. An SS officer arrived one day and reportedly told the camp authorities that Flossenburg was already in Soviet hands. <sup>37</sup>

The Allies, meanwhile, became very active in the skies above us. On a couple of occasions we found on the ground leaflets addressed to the Germans to give up and surrender. Again I saw the familiar aluminum strips float down from above.

One day the allied planes attacked the people working in the potato field with machine guns. Of course they did not know who these workers were, but probably knew the purpose of their work. There were several casualties. One case brought to our dispensary was of a particularly complicated shoulder blade wound. I needed very badly a splint to support the unlucky victim's arm. In desperation, I cut out a piece of our hut's wall, and fashioned it into an improvised splint, all with the aid of a pocket knife.

My meager medical supplies were nearly exhausted. I still had some gauze, iodine, paper bandages, masking tape serving as adhesive tape, and a few pills. There was no doctor anywhere. It was a bad situation, and was getting worse.

In one case I was happy to see something positive was

<sup>37</sup> This "information" was false. Flossenburg was liberated on April 23 by the U.S. Army.



accomplished. There was a young rabbi at Ganacker, who came to me with a complaint that he was having difficulties seeing at night. I assumed that the man was probably suffering from the lack of vitamin A, which could cause night blindness. I turned for help to the German kapos, who were in charge of the place. They got hold of some yellow carrots, the only type available, ( the German farmers used used them as cattle feed), which I turned over to the rabbi. Apparently the carrots helped somewhat, because he later thanked me profusely for saving his vision. I silently paid tribute to my beloved doctor Foerster, who taught me such things at Budzyn.

#### A Most Unusual Case

One of my most trying cases occurred in the waning days of the Third Reich. It was obvious to all of us that the decisive moments are fast approaching. The SS was getting increasingly more nervous and quite jittery. On April 22, two weeks before the end of the war, as I was attending to some patient, I heard a commotion outside. "Quick, Arbus, we need your help!" I run outside to see two inmates approach our hut. A father was leading his son, who seemed hurt. What I saw, as the pair came closer, was simply incredible: the younger man, his right arm held between his thighs, was supporting with his gloved hand his two testicles, still attached to his body. The scrotum was wide open ,and bleeding slightly.

The hysterical father explained to me, after I urged him to calm down, that his son, while working in the field with a shovel spotted some potatoes in the ground, and, when he bent down to pick them up, he was shot from behind by an SS guard. The bullet pierced the scrotum, but luckily did not damage the tes-



ticles. I noticed with a shudder that the felt glove, on which the testicles rested, was very filthy. Visions of a tetanus infection came to my mind, but I had no tetanus shots available.

While I experienced in all the camps, where I worked as a medic, a variety of incredible cases, very rarely found under ordinary circumstances, this was new to me. I managed to recover from the initial shock, and proceeded to do what I thought would be best under this extreme situation. I inserted the testicles back into the scrotum sack, cleaned up the area around the wound, applied some (unsterile) gauze, and taped the whole thing up with my adhesive (masking) tape, making sure that the scrotum opening is tightly closed. The father, reassured, left, while the son bedded down for the night in the infirmary.

The next day I managed to persuade the kapos to take the wounded man to the only physician available in the area, a Luftwaffe doctor. The kapos were very decent. They procured from somewhere a horse drawn cart, and took the patient, under escort, to the Luftwaffe barracks nearby. I was, unfortunately, unable to accompany him, because other patients kept me busy. I would have been curious to hear what the doctor had to say.

The kapos soon returned from this mission of mercy. The military doctor flatly refused to have anything to do with the "filthy Jew". Disappointed, but not too surprised, I advised the wounded man to lay down, and to move as little as possible, to give the wound a chance to heal.

(There was a happy postscript to this strange story. Around 1948, three years after liberation, I met at a Displaced Persons camp at Eggenfelden-not too far from the Ganacker place- the father of the young man. He told me, with joy, that his son



was married and the father of a healthy child. The grateful grandfather told me also that he described his son's miraculous recovery to U.S. Army doctors, and that they were duly impressed. Anyway, he never doubted that Arbuž would do it right. What a naive faith! Still, I may as well admit that I was quite proud of my accomplishment.)

(Another aside is in order here. After liberation I read some relevant literature and discussed the topic with medical people. I discovered that sexual organs<sup>are</sup> tough and that nature is very partial to reproductive organs, so as to assure the survival of the species.)

The war continued. At the edge of the forest near the camp the Germans hid a group of well camouflaged planes. Nearby they stored thousands of drums of aircraft fuel. Somehow the Allies discovered the hideout and raided the war machines. The planes went up in flames, and the fuel dump was ignited. We in the camp had the wonderful spectacle of fuel drums flying up into the air, one by one, and exploding with a loud bang, for many hours. That evening the returning inmates told me a very heart warming story. It seems that a few enterprising prisoners got hold of some potatoes, and, utilizing the burning aircraft, had the audacity to cook the spuds on some burning plane parts. The Luftwaffe crews, now idle, saw these ragged prisoners busy at their cooking, and fell over themselves in laughter. Perhaps the knowledge that they would not have to fly these machines anymore, made them behave like ordinary humans would.

The SS, as if oblivious to the changing reality, continued with their murderous tasks. They took the count of prisoners every morning, and routinely marched them off to the construction site, which was destined to remain unfinished.



On April 25 the whole camp was ordered to assemble. Finally! The decisive moment has struck. My senses on full alert, I joined the crowd.

I received orders to get all my patients, able to march, out of the infirmary. Unfortunately, about 25 inmates, with fractured limbs, high fever, and other disabilities, had to be left behind. But, unlike the SS in other camps, most of our guards did not seem too eager to shoot, and there was hope that the very ill would survive the ordeal, until the liberators came.

It was interesting to watch the behavior of the SSmen, particularly the older ones. They were visibly fearful, and one elderly guard actually cried in front of us and pleaded for mercy. The other SSmen ignored him.

They divided us into groups of fifty. I was pleased to see my testicle patient up and to march. Our fifty men<sup>38</sup> group included some of my friends from Budzyn. Guarded by three SSmen and a dog, we left the camp and proceeded in a southerly direction.<sup>38</sup>

At the moment, only our intuition could help us in planning any steps we might take. The SS was still with us and they could be dangerous.

By dividing us into small groups, the SS made it easier for them to control us, and harder for those who planned to esca-

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<sup>38</sup> Documents, unearthed after the war, revealed that Heinrich Himmler, the SS and Gestapo chief, ordered all camp authorities to take inmates into the Tyrolea mountains. There they were supposed to . . . kill us, without too many inconvenient witnesses. For various reasons that plan only partially succeeded.



pe. A stern warning was issued that whoever falls behind will be shot on the spot. There was no food or drink provided. I carried a shoulder bag with a small supply of first aid necessities and a bit of bread which kept me going.

We moved on slowly, trying to delay whatever plans the Germans had for us. Besides, some people were too weak to proceed at a faster pace anyway. We spent two night in the open country. Hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, we staggered along. Our three guards, well armed, and helped by a snarling dog, had the complete control of our miserable band.

It was the morning of the 27th of April. As we were passing a farm, our guards ordered us to halt. One of them entered the farmhouse. After a while he emerged and whispered something to his colleagues. We were quickly herded into the barn, at the edge of the road, while the SSmen entered the house to have a good meal, no doubt.

Once inside the barn, some people, extremely tired, laid down on the ground, resigned to their fate. Others stood, discussing the situation confronting us. Somehow I got together with four other men, including my friends, Joseph Koplewicz and Michael Levin. We decided that the time was critical, and quickly made up our minds. The SS guards forgot that a barn has more than one exit. We opened the door leading to the field and made a dash for freedom.

### Free At Last!

Never in my life, before or after this decisive moment, did I run as fast. The others, naturally, also kept up the fast pace. After about ten minutes, out of breath, we were forced to slow down. We found ourselves in the woods. We continued to mo-



ve on, trying to get away as far as possible from our potential pursuers. (Several months later I met another survivor from our fifty men group. He told me that the SS men discovered our escape, opened up a barrage of fire from their submachine guns, and sent their dog after us. But we were already well out of their range.)

Our little group reached a clearing in the woods. With our hearts pounding wildly, and our nerves at the breaking point, we decided to rest for a while. We sat down on some tree stumps and had a brief discussion about our next steps. In our naivete, but perhaps also guided by our knowledge of the German partiality to documents of any kind, we decided to provide ourselves with a bit of a document, that was to show that we were released officially.

Michael, who had a good hand at writing such things, produced a sheet of paper. He wrote a brief statement to the effect that the five of us were released by the SS, and signed the document with a fictitious name of an SS Sturmfuhrer.

Meanwhile, we became aware of some Germans moving about in the distance. Soon a Luftwaffe major approached us and asked politely who we were. When told that we were released "Katzettlers", he burst out laughing. Pointing to our striped uniforms, he said with a grin: "They really dressed you up like monkeys!" and continued on his way. We were slightly puzzled by the officer's reaction.

After a short rest, we were again on the move, and, on reaching a hamlet, decided to split into two groups, making ourselves less visible that way. Adam Herling, a fellow with a nice, sweet voice, who often entertained us with romantic songs, another companion whose name i can't recall, and I, stopped at



the nearest farmer's door, on which a sign announced the owner to be a member of the NSDAP, the Nazi Party. (National-Socialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei) Joseph and Michael moved on to the next farm, as a precaution. We were in the hamlet of Ponhartsberg, in Lower Bavaria, (Nieder-Bayern), on the farm of Xavier Eder Semelbaur.

To the visibly startled farmer I announced, in my best German, that we are released "Katzetlers", and that we would like to stay on his farm until things calm down. Herr Semelbaur, a grizzled, lean man in his late fifties, replied that we can stay with him, but cautioned us that <sup>u</sup>young German volunteers, 14-16 years old, mobilized in these last days of the war, and still fanatically faithful to the Fuehrer, are present in the vicinity, ~~XXXXXX~~ busy hunting for escapees. It was obvious that the shrewd Bavarian did not believe our story that we were freed from a camp. Maybe he heard something that we were not <sup>a</sup> aware of.

We settled down in a large room where the farmer's wife, a mousy little woman, fed us a meal of smoked meat, potato salad and apples. Everything tasted heavenly. The future looked suddenly much brighter.

When Herr Semelbaur agreed to take us in, he did it for his own reasons. A member of the party, he must have felt that his sins will be forgiven if he can show that he helped three camp inmates. Because we were quite aware of his motivation, it spared us the need to show gratitude. Our behavior toward him and his family was coldly correct and they responded in kind.

As we soon discovered, a French prisoner of war worked for Herr Semelbaur, and, in addition, an Hungarian army soldier assisted in managing the farm. (Two years later this Hungarian



married the farmer's older daughter. I am sure that he eventually took over the farm, making a modest contribution to change the ethnic makeup of the "Herren Volk".)

To our surprise, we also discovered three Hungarian officers with their elegant wives, hiding out in a secluded room on the farm, apparently also waiting for the end of the war. The officers, in elaborate uniforms, were probably Hungarian aristocrats. German allies, they were obviously not very happy with the coming collapse of the Reich. To us they were downright unfriendly. We decided to ignore them.

Maria, the older daughter of Herr Semelbaur, was a heavy ~~set~~ young woman, not overly intelligent. Her younger sister was slimmer, smarter, and friendly to us. Both girls smelled strongly of cow dung, since both spent many hours daily, feeding, milking, and cleaning the dozen cows in the adjoining barn. There were also pigs to take care of, and dozens of free ranging chickens. Their mother, a sickly looking, thin woman, probably illiterate, spoke a local dialect which to our ears did not sound German, at least ~~not~~ the German we were familiar with. Her speech was rapid and I was unable to distinguish any words. Luckily, we dealt mostly with her husband and the two daughters who spoke standard German, or rather Bavarian, when addressing us.

Next morning, after a meal of milk soup, a very bland concoction, but heavenly tasting to me- I have-n't had any milk since Sadlovice-dark bread and apples, the host asked us to step outside. There he pointed to a distant road and a large structure on the far side of it. He explained to us that the building was a military warehouse, and that the night before German civilians broke into it, and helped themselves to various



goods. He then admitted that he also had a hand in the break-in. He retrieved from a hiding place three Wehrmacht summer uniforms and suggested that we might be safer if we put them on. We did not have to be told twice. If that is what it takes to conceal our identity, so be it. All three of us suddenly metamorphosed into German soldiers.

The green uniforms did not exactly fit us- they were meant for much huskier fellows- but in any army this is expected. I remember that we laughed a lot when we saw ourselves dressed in these oversized outfits. The farmer cautioned us to extremely careful- the young German volunteers were still around - and asked us to join him in the field, where we willingly gave him a hand in gathering hay.

For lunch and dinner we got again smoked meat and apples. The farmer's family ate the same food though. It was monotonous but certainly more nourishing than our camp fare.

The morning of April 29 was destined to be memorable for our group. As we looked out the window facing the hamlet, we saw a glorious sight: as far as we could see, white sheets were displayed in front of all the houses. So, that is it: the war was over, at least for us. I felt both elation and sadness, sadness above all.

Our hosts were visibly shaken and gloomy. Maria took from a shelf some phonorecords and began methodically to break them into small pieces. Curious, I looked at one label: "Das Horst Wessel Lied"<sup>39</sup> it proclaimed. I have heard this song often, usually sang by the marching SS.

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<sup>39</sup> Horst Wessel, son of a protestant chaplain, wrote the words and tune to what became the official song of the Nazi party and the second official anthem-after "Deutschland ueber Alles"-



No wonder that Maria was concerned; the "inspiring" lyrics of the song contain the infamous line: "Wenn das Judenblut von Messer spritzt!" (When the Knife drips with Jewish Blood)

We quickly shed our German uniforms, happy to get rid of those tainted symbols of the German rule. And then we heard our host say that the Americans are approaching the village. The three of us rushed out to the road. Indeed, in the distance we could see a column of soldiers coming in our direction. They marched by. We exchanged greetings. We yelled in Polish, German, Yiddish. A few soldiers responded in broken Yiddish. We shook hands with some. They passed. We were free.

But where was our happiness? I did not feel it. Nor did the others. The enormity of our tragedy did not yet hit us, but we were dimly aware, if uncertain, that our losses were irreparable. We were now safe at last, but alone.

### The War is Over

On May 1, 1945, the French POW on the farm invited us to a celebration in Hebertsfelden, the village adjoining Ponhartsberg. All <sup>the</sup> Frenchmen in the vicinity, POW's and forced laborers, organized a big party. There was music, good food- rice, fresh fruit, Chocolate, wine- foods we did not taste for years. For a few hours we were able to forget our troubles.

We then returned to the farm and the monotonous fare of the Bavarian farmer. On May 8<sup>Germany surrendered and</sup> the end of the war in Europe was proclaimed. The Nazi era was over.

I observed with envy a lot of activity among our non-Jewish fellow sufferers. POW's, foreign workers, Frenchmen, Belgians, Czechs, Poles, Russians and others, packed up and started joy-

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of the Third Reich. He was killed in a skirmish with communists in 1930. See William Shirer's The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich



fully on their difficult trek home, to rejoin their mostly intact families. Only we Jews had no home left- we stayed put.

Afterwards I watched trucks full of Russians pass the road. They were singing Soviet patriotic songs. Red flags fluttered in the wind. They were going home too. Everybody but us. Oh yes, some nationalistic Poles also stayed behind. They could not make up their minds about going back to Poland dominated by communists.

I remained on the farm for several weeks. On one of my visits to the larger nearby town of Eggenfelden, I encountered a friend from Budzyn, Chaim Kuperstock. He persuaded me to move in with him and another survivor from his home town, a guy named Rochman. Rochman and Kuperstock lived comfortably in the home of a rich cattle and horse dealer, Herr Reinberger.

They told Frau Reinberger that their friend, a doctor, would like to move in with them. "Herr Doctor" would be welcome, they were told. My friends did not bother to tell me about their little deception. Their intention, most likely, was a desire to impress our hostesss who, like many Germans, just adored titles.

When I complained to my new neighbors, after Frau Reinberger addressed me several times "Herr Doctor", they vehemently denied any attempt at deception. To them I was still the "Lagerarzt", therefore "Herr Doctor" was the appropriate title for me. At first I was a little embarrassed by this affair, but I certainly could<sup>not</sup> tell the Reinbergers that their house guests were lying. So I was stuck for a while with the title. Luckily, our hosts were a healthy, well nourished pair, and I spared myself real embarrassment, in case they might call on me for my professional expertise.



The Reinberger household consisted of Herr Reinberger, a corpulent, mustached and dull burgher, his wife, an unexceptional Hausfrau, who, I was informed, made her husband rich by bringing in into their marriage a nice dowry, and a middle aged domineering housekeeper, who also doubled as a cook.

This rather disagreeable person concocted daily very rich meals, full of butter and cream. For the three of us, these high in calories meals were just what the doctor ordered. As for me, after the dull food on the Semelbaur farm, sitting down three times a day to these sumptuous meals was a great pleasure.

I moved to their comfortable house on the second day of June, a month after my liberation, and it was a considerable improvement over the farmhouse. I had my own room, a lovely bed, with clean smelling sheets, and a bathroom just outside the room.

While the Reinbergers were quite friendly to us, even deferential, I felt that the housekeeper did not like our presence in the house. Soon I found out why. In the back of the house there was a little bathhouse, built over a small stream. There Herr Reinberger went for his ablutions, accompanied by the housekeeper. Not only was she then a housekeeper and cook, but a mistress as well.

Frau Reinberger was bitter, but apparently afraid of a scandal, or perhaps intimidated by the stronger personalities of the two lovers, kept mum about these goings on.

One of the more exciting events of ~~that~~ brief ~~sojourn~~ at that household was a happy reunion of two brothers. Chaim Silberstein was a tall, very handsome young man, who came to Budzyn from Hrubieshow. One day he came to Eggenfelden to visit friends, and we invited him to stay overnight in our place. This gave us



a chance to reminisce about our shared past.

On waking up next morning I heard a commotion outside. My window faced the street and when I looked out I saw two half-tracks just pulling up in front of the building. Chaim<sup>Kuperstock</sup> and I rushed down to the street and saw, to our astonishment, that both vehicles were Star of David markings. A British major emerged from the first vehicle and greeted us with the Hebrew Shalom! In broken German he told us that he was an officer of the Palestinian Jewish Brigade, and that he was looking for his brother Chaim Silberstein!

The meeting of the two brothers was something to see. I was envious of Chaim's luck. With pride he introduced Major Silberstein to the very impressed Herr Reiberger. The cattle dealer beamed with delight at meeting such a rare "Jude" who was also a warrior,

Our prestige grew enormously with that incident. The Reinbergers became even more deferential. It must be remembered that Jewish survivors were at that time held in high esteem anyway, by the newly guilt-ridden Germans. The designation: "Ehemalige Katzetler" (former inmate of concentration camps) or even simply "Jude", opened the door to many advantages, not normally available. One of those advantages was, of course, the readiness of most Germans to take in Jewish lodgers, and this without pay, which they could not afford in most cases anyway.

### Return to Poland

In the living room of our German hosts there stood an expensive shortwave radio. While playing one day with the controls, I heard, to my delight, Yiddish emanating from the set. I soon determined that the Yiddish program originated



in my home town, Warsaw. Two or three times a week, Diana Blumenfeld and Jonas Turkow, well known prewar Jewish actors, broadcasted a 15 minute program in Yiddish, something that the three and a half million strong Jewish community in Poland did not have available before the war.

The program consisted of news and information important to the remnants of Polish Jewry, interspersed with some very welcome music and Jewish folksongs, usually sung by Diane Blumenfeld, an artist with a gifted voice.

On June 12, 1945, I tuned in to my Jewish program as usual. Toward the end of the regrettably short program, somebody was broadcasting messages and greetings to various relatives and friends living abroad, from Jewish survivors in Poland. To my astonishment and joy I clearly heard a message from David Arbuz to somebody in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I had no doubt that this was my brother David, since our family name is rather rare, although the recipients in Argentina were not known to me. I assumed that these might be friends, who newly arrived in Argentina and that David met them during the war.

I immediately made plans to go to Poland. At that time transportation of any kind in Europe was in shambles, and any trip, of necessity, had to be improvised. Luckily, at about the same time, the Polish Government was trying to lure expatriates of various kinds, forced laborers, freed camp inmates, and veterans of the Polish armies fighting in the West, back to the decimated Poland. Transports were leaving frequently with returnees. I enrolled in one of the Polish committees, active in the area, to be repatriated "home".

This repatriation was very controversial at the time.



Many nationalist and right wing Poles fought against it and considered those going back home as "traitors". This did not bother me, as I was going there for a different reason. Besides, I did not have much sympathy for these Poles who decided to remain exiles; they were not especially philo-Semitic. I also thought that I should go back in any case, to search for any surviving family members or friends. And, of course, David was on my mind.

In early August, our train left for Poland, in a round about way. Europe was undergoing great upheavals, borders of many countries were subjected to basic changes, and people of various nationalities were being shifted. Some were going East, while others, for various reasons, were on the move in the opposite direction. Trains, after the huge devastation of the war, were in short supply, and those that were operational were mobbed by refugees moving about.

Our train stopped at Prague, the capital of the newly reborn Czechoslovakia. As I stood on the platform, near my train, ready to jump on in case it started to move, another train, full of people, and going in opposite direction, stopped across the platform. Some young people left the platform and were now milling about.

A <sup>U</sup>young woman of about 20 approached me, and asked in Polish: "Are you going to Poland? Are you Jewish?" When I answered in the affirmative, she requested me to do her a favor. She left her parents in Poland, and would like me to deliver a letter to them. She also told me that I could, most likely, stay with them for a few days, if I found it necessary, as accommodations in Warsaw were scarce as a result of the Nazi destruction. I promised to deliver her letter, and, indeed, I stayed with her family briefly.



We wished each other good luck and boarded our respective trains, which took us in the opposite directions. In the evening our train arrived at Katowice, our first stop on Polish soil. I was back in Poland.

There were five of us from Eggenfelden. We decided to stick together, at least until we get to Warsaw, our final destination. At the railroad station we were advised to go to the local Polish Red Cross, to get accomodation for the night, There our first bitter experience with Polish antiSemitism took place. The woman at the reception desk took a long look at our group, and said in a hard voice: "You, panowie, (Sirs) are of Mosaic faith, you have to go to the Kehilla (Jewish Community Council) to find a place". We looked at each other, not believing what we just heard. This was the new Poland, the Peoples Republic? Our protestations were ignored.

We left the unfriendly Red Cross and began a search for a Jewish institution. Somehow we located a still functioning synagogue, and the beadle let us in. We spent the night on the hard floor of the shul. Naturally, we were bitterly disappointed with our reception and braced ourselves for more hardships,

An incredibly crowded train brought us finally to Warsaw, or rather to the Praga suburb, across the Vistula river. Since most of Warsaw was in ruins, <sup>the bulk of</sup> ^ of the population was concentrated in that old, dilapidated part, which I rarely saw in the prewar days.

My first step, after taking leave of my companions, was to locate the young woman's family, and to deliver her letter. With some difficulty I found the place. Her father was a kosher butcher, one of the few still functioning in the city. He run a small butcher shop and lived nearby. The family received me



daughters' letter. They asked me many questions, to which I had only a few answers. Then they offered me generously food and drink, and, as their daughter anticipated, also shelter, at least for the time being. Naturally, I took them up on their offer, especially since I really had no alternative. In sum, I was lucky to have met that girl.

After a brief rest, I rushed over to the Jewish Committee, to register, and above all, to check their list of survivors. To get there I had to cross the Vistula river. As I could see, all three bridges linking Praga with Warsaw proper before the war were destroyed by the retreating Germans a year earlier, and the only bridge functioning at the moment was one constructed by Soviet army engineers.

It was a rather primitive affair, with wooden planks resting on pontoons. As I walked on the bridge, I could feel the planks shaking under the hooves of the horses and the wheels of carts of all sizes and shapes, loaded with people. These carts and occasional trucks were the only mode of transportation, available at the moment.

I was too absorbed in my thoughts to see the ruined streets around me. Finally I reached the building of the Committee. There, tense with anticipation and worry, I joined a short line in front of the registration desk. My first question: "Are there any Arbuzes on the list?" was immediately answered in the negative. The name Arbuz is quite <sup>uncommon</sup>, and the sympathetic young women knew probably most of the names on the list by heart. I had few illusions about any surviving members of my family, but the absence of David's name puzzled and disturbed me.

I then asked the receptionist whether she had Bronka Zegrze on the list. Her face brightened. "You know Bronka?"



she asked. "Yes, she is very close to me", I answered. The young Jewish woman became animated. "Yes, she is alive. I know her well. We both escaped from Poniatowa camp before the massacre there, and we managed to hide until liberation."

She showed me Bronka's name on the survivors' list, along with her younger sister Danuta, whom Bronka, for some reason, registered as her daughter. I did not question that deviation from the true relationship between the two. I decided that she probably was forced to do it while in hiding, and left her sister's status unchanged for the time being. Under the Nazi rule people were often compelled to do the strangest things, for the survival's sake, and at this point things were still quite unsettled.

I took down Bronka's address, a street in a prosperous prewar neighborhood, and, without hesitation, registered my own name, giving Bronka's address, 43 Sixth of August street (6-te-go Sierpnia) as my own.

It was a rather long walk through ruined streets, but I practically flew there, buoyed by the anticipation of seeing my dear Bronka. I tried to picture Bronka, the girl I last saw in 1941, in Warsaw. She was small, but had big black eyes. Her hair and complexion were dark, but her teeth were snowwhite. She had a prominent, Semitic nose, but her face became radiant when she smiled. I could not believe that I was going to see her in a few moments. The future suddenly became more promising.

Finally I arrived at the building. At once I saw that something was wrong. The building was undergoing renovation. Plasterers and painters were all over the place. The apartments were empty. I rushed to the super to inquire. "The building is being prepared for army officers' quarters" she told me. "Bronka



Zegrze? Yes, there was a young woman by that name, who lived in one of the apartments with her daughter, but she had to move out. Everybody had to move out. Don't know where to."

I was shattered. (For the next few years, whenever I inquired by mail about any surviving Arbuzes or Zegrzes, the Warsaw Jewish Committee invariably informed me about Isak Arbuz and Bronka Zegrze living at 43 Sixth of August street in Warsaw. These erroneous communications drove me up the wall.)

And so my futile search for Bronka began. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the building in question was being painted from top to bottom. In those difficult and chaotic days, when families and friends, not only surviving Jews, but also Christian Poles, were scattered all over the continent, everybody was searching for everybody else. One desperate way was to put up notices on scraps of paper, wherever it was feasible. Sometimes these notices were simply written on the walls or boards. Particularly in Warsaw, which went through two uprisings, such notices were posted in the most unlikely places. There was thus a possibility that Bronka posted such a notice in the building she left, giving her forwarding address. But, unfortunately for me, the plastering and painting of the walls removed that chance for good.

Heartbroken, I <sup>t</sup>returned to the Jewish Committee, and spoke to the young woman. She was ~~sympathetic~~ sympathetic, but could not help me. I did not give up. I knew that it was going to be difficult, but I was determined to find Bronka somehow.

I walked over to the destroyed ghetto, trying to locate the street where we lived before the disaster. What my eyes beheld, my senses refused to absorb. There were no signs of streets that lined this area not so long ago. A vast collection of bricks



littered the ground. Tall weeds, fertilized, no doubt, by so much blood spilled here, grew in abundance, mercifully obscuring much of the debris.

I walked the paths, carved out in <sup>this</sup> urban desert of death, and silently cried. I cried for my family and dear friends, now gone forever. I shed dry tears for this city that I loved, for the vibrant people, who, not so long ago suffered so much on this piece of land.

At one point I approached an area, where I thought I am in the right place. Still, I was unable to recognize my street, much less the house that stood there, on Nalewki street. Reluctantly, I gave up the futile search.

I was brutally brought back to the reality of the present, when a Polish con-man, seeing me approaching,

bent down, pretending to find something in the rubble. As I passed him, he stretched out his right hand, in which a ring glistened. "I just found this gold ring, want to buy it?" I ignored him. The ring was, without a doubt, a fake; the con-artist preyed on the gullible Poles, who strongly believed that the former ghetto was a veritable gold mine. After all, Jews were all rich, weren't they?

For three days I stayed with the kindly butcher's family. It was time for me to move on. Luckily, I met on the street a prewar friend, who recently returned from the Soviet Union. Celina, who before the war was a lovely girl, with a sweet, fresh face, changed considerably. Bad diet and adverse conditions in the Soviet Union affected her appearance; her face was puffed up and pale, and she appeared much heavier and older. Nevertheless, I was able to recognize her and we embraced joyfully.



Naturally, I asked her what she was doing in Warsaw. Without much explanation, she offered to accomodate me for a few nights. She gave me her address and said: "You'll see what I am engaged in when you come." It sounded very mysterious.

In the evening, exhausted by a futile day of searching for phantom survivors, I walked over to Celina's place and was met by my friend and another young woman, both surrounded by a swarm of little kids, both boys and girls. The mystery was soon cleared up. The two women were in charge of a shelter for Jewish children, who at that time were being retrieved from Catholic convents, Polish orphanages and private Christian homes, where these children survived the Nazi genocide. Now they were orphans, and in need of help. (Eventually they were sent to the pre-Israel Palestine, mostly by clandestine means.)

The first night in this place, which was simply a two bedroom apartment, I slept at top of an oldfashioned tub<sup>that was</sup> covered by a wooden board, which became my very uncomfortable bed. The next night, the two women took pity on me. I slept "luxuriously" on a wide bed, with the two women on one side, and I on the other.

I soon discovered that the tub was much more restful the night before. All night long the children kept coming to the bed and ~~and~~ waking one or the other of the adult caretakers, demanding help to get them a drink, go to the toilet, etc. Patiently, the worn out women obliged. But for me there was hardly any rest.

### The Radio Announcer

Since telephones were still a luxury at that time, whenever I needed some information, I had to go the source personally. So next morning I walked over to the offices of the Polish Radio to inquire as to the identity of the Jewish program anoun-



cer. I was given a Polish sounding name of a woman and her address. I immediately set out to visit the lady.

When I arrived at the address given to me, I was greeted by a late middle aged , well dressed woman, with a fine "Aryan" face. She introduced me to her mother, and <sup>the</sup> three of us sat down in their living room. My hostess produced a large folio, densely covered with Yiddish script, and began to leaf through it, in search of my brother's name.

Suddenly the door bell rung. The woman's face darkened. "My God!" They should not find out that I am Jewish!" With that she quickly shut the book and hid it under the table. Her mother opened the door to a neighbor. They chatted for a few minutes, and the Gentile neighbor left.

I was quite flabbergasted by this scene, which, after all, took place after the Nazis were gone from Warsaw for over a year. When I asked, in my ignorance, for an explanation, the woman proceeded to enlighten <sup>me</sup> as to the Polish reality at the time, "It is still safer to pretend to be Aryan.. Bad things were still happening to Jews in liberated Peoples Poland." (Less than a year later the bloody pogrom at Kielce, where 46 Jewish survivors were lynched by a Polish mob, under suspicious circumstances, confirmed to me the radio announcer's cautious behavior as being quite sensible.)

Finally she located David Arbuz's entry. The message apparently originated from Lublin. Since my family came from there, I was not overly disturbed. I inquired as to the best means of getting there. I was told that the best way to travel to Lublin was by train. However, I was warned by the well informed Polish Radio employee that trains going anywhere, but particularly those going to Lublin, were sometimes held up at night by right



wing gangs. Any uniformed personnel, party members, or Jews could expect no mercy from these fanatical nationalists. I ~~mentally~~ prepared myself for possible trouble, but decided to <sup>go</sup> there regardless. I thanked the two women for their help and left their apartment.

Before embarking on my dangerous trip to Lublin, I wanted to search for Bronka outside Warsaw. That search took me the following day to a town near Warsaw, called Zyrardow. I remembered that Elly Henschel, my former coworker at the drug store, came from that town. I was hoping to find her and perhaps get from her some information on the whereabouts of Bronka.

From the railroad station I went to the city hall, where I was given the address of Elly's sister. A policeman gave me directions and I walked over to the place. On the way as I was passing several streets, I occasionally glanced up at the metal signs posted over building entrances. These signs customarily contained the house numbers and, and among other information, also the landlord's name. It was obvious that these signs referred to prewar owners, and were not yet changed. Most had typically Jewish names: plenty of Goldbergs, Grynbergs, and Rosenbaums. Sadly I realized that only the names remained. All these people, once influential citizens of the town, were gone forever. With bitterness I recalled the now irrelevant slogan of Polish anti-Semites of the time past, referring to Jews: "Kamienice wasze, ulice nasze!" (Your buildings, our streets)

On arriving at my destination, I <sup>found</sup> Elly's sister without difficulty. Unfortunately, she had no information on the fate of her sister, much less of Bronka. She speculated, sadly, that Elly must have been killed in the Warsaw uprising of 1944. Elly was an ardent Polish patriot, and I had to agree with her sister



as to Elly's probable fate. I took leave of the bereaved woman, apologizing for opening old wounds, and returned to Warsaw in a depressed mood.

Then it was on to Lublin. I arrived there, without incidents, on a late afternoon. Lublin was the place of my birth, but it changed much since 1927, when my family left it. I tried to find the place of my birth but there was no sign of it left.

As long as I was searching for any survivors, I was able to repress my inner need for mourning after my family. I wanted badly to delay that moment of truth as long as I could. But I knew that it was coming sooner or later.

At the Jewish Council I found on the list several Arbuzes. I also discovered the names of two sisters Mittelman, good friends of mine from Budzyn. Roza Mittelman was the dental assistant, who worked with our amiable dentist, dr. Beck.

I went to visit the two sisters. They were *delighted* to see me, and, as I hoped, they immediately offered to give me a corner of their store-front apartment to stay as long as I needed. In those days hotels were nonexistent, and even if some were available, I didn't have any money to pay. Staying with friends was the only possibility, short of sleeping on a bench in a park.

I was introduced to a friendly young man, who was engaged to Roza's sister, <sup>Elia</sup><sub>^</sub>. All four of us would sit around a table, in the next four evenings, talking and reminiscing about our recent experiences.

I visited the Arbuzes, the young couple from Budzyn, who had the good fortune to survive the war. They were, naturally, pleased to see another Arbuz still alive. We exchanged information on other Budzyn survivors, and had a glass of tea. A girl



of about 15 came in and was introduced to me as a distant relative, also named Arbuz. When I asked her if she knew David Arbuz, she nodded. Yes, her older brother David left Poland recently, to go to Palestine. She also confirmed that they had cousins in Argentina. I was shattered. That was the end of my hope of finding David. The radio message was from the wrong David. So David did not survive.

### The Bitter Truth

After several days in the town of my birth, I reluctantly took leave of my friends and cousins, and returned to Warsaw, again without complications.

I returned to the Committee, which was my only link with the past, and was informed that two women inquired about me. Naturally, I became very excited and hastened to find out the details. After a brief search I was provided with a name and address in Lodz, where the two women apparently lived. The names rekindled my hopes of finding my brother. The message was from the mother and younger sister of Bella, David's fiancée.

So I found myself in Lodz, a city I saw last time from the German truck as I was being transported to the Stalag. As I entered the Gezundheit apartment, the mother, Helena, embraced me without a word, and led me to the living room. Soon Halina, whom I remembered from the better times as Rosalie, the blond girl with the dimpled cheeks, entered the room. She greeted me with joy. Seated at a table, we were soon joined by Mr. Gezundheit, and Lolek, the youngest of the family.

I sensed from their demeanor that what I was about to hear was not the good news I was hoping for. They delayed the moment by serving tea and cookies. Eventually, sensing my unhappiness,



they decided that the time has come. They started their story by telling me something about my parents. At the <sup>time</sup> ~~the~~ when ~~the~~ most of the people in the ghetto were starving, the more flexible or secular Jews were willing to eat nonkosher foods. The Poles were enriching themselves by smuggling into the ghetto various goods, mostly food, Butter and other fats were scarce, but lard, a staple in Poland, could be had in the ghetto for a price. But my father, who insisted on adhering to the strict code of kashrut, regardless of consequences, steadfastly refused to compromise. His meals, during that crucial period of 1942, consisted mostly of watery potato soups, with no fat whatsoever. As a result, he became ill with edema, and eventually died of a lack of necessary nutrients. At the time of mass burials, my father, in recognition of his piety and decency, was given an individual burial.

My mother was more sensible, and willing to break with the traditional ways in order to survive. (On my most recent visit to Paris, in the fall of 1988, Halina, who settled in that city along with her whole surviving family, told me something new, something that I did not know before. It seems that Bronka, under Bella's prodding, used to steal cod liver oil from the Weingart drug store, and deliver it to my mother, who used it for cooking. The taste must have been dreadful, but nourishing. The Gezundhajts, tossed around by the fateful circumstances, <sup>have</sup> did not ~~any~~ details of my mother's final fate.)

Amid bitter tears then came the story of David. He, along with Bella, and another couple, Sala and Moshe Miernik, decided to build an underground bunker, which was set up under the warehouse that belonged to Bella's father. They had electric light, water, and even a revolver, plus provisions to keep them going for a while. Their chances were good. But something went wrong.



We will never know what occurred.

One incident that the Gezundhajts related to me, might offer a clue. Once David came up through the well concealed trap door for some chore, and encountered a Pole loitering about. The situation was critical. David and his companions had to make a quick decision. They knew that they had a cruel dilemma on their hands: to kill or be killed. They opted for decency. After listening to the Pole's solemn promises that he will not betray them, they let him go.

According to Bella's mother, David was instrumental in persuading the rest of the Bella's family to leave the doomed ghetto. They found shelter in a suburb of Warsaw, and lived to see Warsaw liberated by the Red Army in the winter of 1944. They rushed without delay to <sup>the</sup> warehouse in the destroyed former ghetto. They found the warehouse obliterated. The ground, covered with ice and snow, was solidly frozen.

Having no tools, they dug with their bare hands. Finally with a supreme effort they cleared the trapdoor, and opened the bunker. To their despair they found four skeletons spread out on the floor. They identified Bella and David by their hair.

The four victims were buried at the Jewish cemetery. On a slab of black granite an inscription in Polish was engraved: "Bina Gezundhajt, Sala Spiewak, Dawid Arbuz, Moshe Miernik, perished in the tragic moments of April 1943. Family Gezundhajt."

Halina gave me a picture of the grave. (On my visit to Poland in 1983 I found the grave still intact.) They had no information as to the fate of my family and believed that they were all deported to Treblinka. Nor did they know anything about Bronka.

I was numb with pain. I could not even cry. Until that mo-



ment I was still somehow convinced that if anybody of my family survived, it had to be David. He was the most intelligent, the most resourceful of my family. Now I knew. I was all alone.

In the next days I found my friend Joseph, who now lived in Lodz. He was lucky enough to discover in Lodz a childhood sweetheart, and married her. She survived as a Gentile and was an administrator of an apartment house. For her services she received a rentfree, quite large apartment. They asked me to move<sup>in</sup> with them.

Typical of living quarters in Poland in those days, one room was hit by a bomb, and the floor was missing. The rest of the apartment was intact. Like my radio announcer, Roma, Joseph's new wife still retained her Polish Christian name.

My friends, the Ge~~z~~undhajts, decided to leave Poland. With a heavy heart I said good bye to these people who were now my only link to the prewar years. They moved on to Paris, where they eventually prospered, and still live today, except for Mr. Ge~~z~~undhajt, who died in the early sixties.

For the next several weeks I searched for other members of my family. I traveled, visited offices, wrote letters to the Red Cross, to the Soviet Union, to Jewish Committee s. Ironically, in several instances I received information about myself. Invariably, the address supplied was the one I knew was false. It was, logically enough, the address of Bronka, the place where a Polish army officer probably resided now.

### Exodus

A few weeks later, convinced that my search was futile, I, along with Joseph and Roma, joined the exodus from that vast cemetery of Polish Jewry, Poland. On October 28, 1945, we arrived in Berlin, the gateway to a new chapter in our lives.

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